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A LIVING LIFE, A LIVING DEATH: A STUDY OF BESSIE HEAD'S WRITINGS AS A  
SURVIVAL STRATEGY

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores Bessie Head's writing as a survival strategy through which, by transforming her personal experience into imaginative literature, she was able to give meaning and purpose to a life under permanent threat from the dominant groups first in South Africa and later in Botswana. This threat included the destructive effect of the many fixed labels imposed upon her which included: a 'Coloured' woman; the daughter of a woman designated mad; an exile; a psychotic; a tragic black woman, a Third World woman writer. In my view, her endeavours to avoid and defeat such limited and static definitions produced work characterized by contradiction and paradox. In this way she asserted her right to survive and determined, like Makhaya in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, to establish a 'living life' in place of the 'living death that a man [sic] could be born into' (136 RC). Her preoccupations include her relationship to her absent mother, her feelings about women's sexuality, and her need for love, articulated throughout her writings in terms not only of the threats against her but also the ways in which she empowered herself, and thus survived. I have drawn on a combination of Bessie Head's unpublished letters and papers, her published writings, and relevant critical works in order to show how her writing was the mediating agent which related her preoccupations to her experiences, while also facilitating her ability to survive and finally to transcend the all-pervasive power structures which influenced her life and her sense of self. As she said in the last years of her life (with bitter understatement) 'I am no failure' (20.2.1986 KMM BHP)



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To Marianne, with love

and to the memory of my Nan, Pat Tyrrell (1902-1992) and

Sue Williams (1946-1997)

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#### ABBREVIATIONS AND NOTES

As Bessie Head notes in her work, Botswana is the name of the country, the Batswana are the Tswana people, and a Motswana is an individual member of the Tswana tribe. I have used these terms where relevant.

I have used a considerable number of Bessie Head's unpublished letters and papers from the Khama III Memorial Museum, Serowe. These are given throughout the text with the date and the following designation:

KMM BHP Khama Memorial Museum Bessie Head Papers

Bessie Head's novels, short stories and other writings are abbreviated thus:

C	The Cardinals
RC	When Rain Clouds Gather
M	Maru
QP	A Question of Power
CT	The Collector of Treasures
TTP	Tales of Tenderness and Power
SVRW	Serowe, Village of the Rain Wind
BC	A Bewitched Crossroad

...books rescued me. They were the places where I could bring the broken bits and pieces of myself and put them together again, the places where I could dream about alternative realities, possible futures. They let me know firsthand that if the mind was to be the site of resistance, only the imagination could make it so. To imagine, then, was a way to begin the process of transforming reality. All that we cannot imagine will never come into being (bell hooks, 'Narratives of Struggle' in P. Mariani 1991, 54-5).

...then why don't you read what I have written and make up your own mind about what you think, testing it against your own life and experience. Never mind about Professors White and Black (Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* 1976, 18).

Literature is where I go to explore the highest and lowest places in human society and in the human spirit, where I hope to find not absolute truth but the truth of the tale, of the imagination, and of the heart (Salman Rushdie, 'Choice between Light and Dark' in P. Mariani 1991, 95).

Reality is what we take to be true. What we take to be true is what we believe. What we believe is based upon our perceptions. What we perceive depends upon what we look for. What we look for depends upon what we think. What we think depends upon what we perceive. What we perceive determines what we believe. What we believe determines what we take to be true. What we take to be true is our reality (Gary Zukav, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* 1979, 328).

## INTRODUCTION

Much South African literature has understandably been concerned with apartheid. Until recently, this inhumane system dominated all spheres of South African life from the material to the spiritual, and infused them with all the ills that beset a society with its roots in the colonial past. The literary preoccupation with apartheid has, however, been criticized. For example Mphahlele, in *The African Image*, published as early as 1962, suggested that

as long as the white man's politics continue to impose on us a ghetto existence, so long shall the culture and therefore literature of South Africa continue to shrivel up, to sink lower and lower; and for so long shall we in our writing continue to reflect only a minute fraction of life (Mphahlele 1962, 109).

Lewis Mkosi later restated this, accusing South African writers of presenting 'journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature' (1973, 110). Claiming that 'nothing stands behind the fiction of black South Africans' (109), he suggested that writers have renounced tradition without gaining from the accumulated benefits of modern European life. In a paper delivered at the Second African Writers Conference in Stockholm in April 1986 entitled 'Beyond Protest: New Directions in South African Literature' (Schipper 1989), Njabulo Ndebele suggested that South African literature is 'protest literature that merely changed emphasis' and that it is 'still rooted in the emotional and intellectual polarities of South African oppression'

(quoted in Schipper 1989, 43). Ndebele posits that the future of South African writing depends upon the ability of writers to free the creative process from the laws that have hitherto governed them, and to extend their perception 'of what can be written about, and the means and methods of writing' (43). He believes that there is now a new challenge for literature: 'the challenge to free the entire social imagination of the oppressed from the laws of perception that have characterized Apartheid society' (43).

The South African writer Bessie Head was known to these prominent writers and critics. Indeed her writing career, and her life itself, were both almost at an end by the time Ndebele issued his challenge. However it was never acknowledged during her lifetime that she had not only met his criteria but had also transcended the narrow generalizations of all three critics, stating 'I know that the static death theme of white minority domination is not the total story of South Africa...Beneath that death there is life...' ('Why Do I Write', undated ms. KMM BHP). Others, too, have chosen not to note Bessie Head's importance as a writer which illustrates how 'What is commonly called literary history is actually a record of choices. Which writers have survived their time and which have not depends upon who noticed them and chose to record the notice' (Bernikow 1974, 3). There are those, however, who are strongly attracted to Bessie Head's work, and in recent years she has been noticed and widely acknowledged by both academics and by general readers. She is now recognised as a 'great writer of Southern Africa' (O'Brien 1992, 77 ). A biography, *Thunder behind her Ears* by Gillian Stead Eilersen, was first published in 1995, and an

entire conference was dedicated to her work by the National University of Singapore in October 1996. The burgeoning amount of criticism of her writing includes interpretations according to the theories of Bakhtin, Lacan, feminism, psychoanalysis, humanism and nationalism. According to Craig MacKenzie 'Foreign volunteers have for some time been given her first novel... (which deals fairly extensively with agriculture in Botswana), to orient themselves to their new environment' (1989, 8). He goes on to describe this, her first published work, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1989), as 'a realist novel... With an underlying tone of romance and pastoralism' (13). Another critic describes Makhaya's 'gradual disengagement from South African politics and his quest for personal contentment' (Taiwo 1984, 186). Others suggest that the novel documents social change 'based upon spiritual transformations within her protagonists' (31), deals with 'the condition of women amongst the turbulent background of contemporary Africa' and the possibilities of 'the creation of a new world' (L. Brown, 1981, 161). Margaret Daymond calls *Maru* (1988) a 'visionary fable' (1989, 247). *When Rain Clouds Gather* and Bessie Head's two subsequent novels *Maru* and *A Question of Power* (1987) have all been described as exploring 'personal politics' (Geurts 1986, 48). Another side to Bessie Head's work has also been noted. Arthur Ravenscroft, in an essay on her novels that Bessie Head greatly admired, recognized that beneath the 'straightforward narrative' of *When Rain Clouds Gather*, which he sees as ultimately optimistic and expressive of 'resilience, reconstruction, fulfilment' (179), there lies 'a shadow-novel that works in the dimensions of allusiveness and embryo symbolism' (1976, 179). Another critic, Lloyd Brown, points out what he



calls the 'special bleakness in Head's moral vision and world view' (1981, 159).

Many critics do not, however, allow Bessie Head to put her own construction either upon events in her life or the meaning of her work. Ibrahim, for example, suggests that her work exhibits an 'exilic consciousness' and posits that she 'tests the idea of how a colonized being with an unfixed identity...can "belong" to evil institutions such as apartheid' (1996, 124). Bessie Head herself commented upon the term 'Exile' saying

I note that a lot of people from South Africa including Nadine Gordimer use that as applied to me, with sentiment. Exile means one had a home. South Africa was never home to me. It never will be. I shall never go back there (27.12.1976 KMM BHP).

Ibrahim also quotes Bessie Head's comments that a whole portion of *Maru* 'was myself, my African background' (1996, 94) but goes on to dispute this, saying that 'it is fairly clear that this novel is not overtly about Bessie Head at all' (94-95). This lack of attention to Bessie Head's own feeling about her work gathers momentum when it focuses upon the periods of extreme distress she experienced and its translation into her work. The breakdown Bessie Head describes in *A Question of Power* has been diagnosed and medicalised variously as an inherited and progressive brain disease (Gardner, 1986) and schizophrenia (Beard, 1979). Gillian Stead Eilerson claims that at particular periods in her life 'the clearest traits of mental instability are evident' (1996, 256), while Stephen Gray is quoted as saying that her papers were a 'raving, alcoholic shambles' (Eilerson 1996, 288). Such judgements not

only close down the possibilities of understanding Bessie Head's work, but they are reductive both of her work and of the woman herself.

Bessie Head's novels embrace many issues and preoccupations, and they are open to a myriad interpretations. Few critics, however, note in any positive way the autobiographical nature of her work and how this not only subsumes all other preoccupations but is also the pivot upon which they turn. Indeed, there are those who actively deny this dimension to her work. Ibrahim, for example, assumes that 'Head's protagonist, Elizabeth has been too hastily exiled to a non-place by readers because her life seems to resemble the author's' (1996, 125). She appears to agree with Arlene Elder, whom she quotes as pointing out that 'there is always imminent danger for women writers in general, especially Third World women writers, to be considered less serious because they are writing themselves - their autobiographies' (1996, 125). If the life stories of women are considered 'less serious' because they are women, then this should be challenged rather than colluded with by ignoring the autobiographical aspect of their writing. Such devaluing of autobiograpahy is implicit in Patrick Colm Hogan's article *Bessie Head's A Question of Power: A Lacanian Psychosis*. He says that 'There has been an unfortunate tendency for critics to treat *A Question of Power* as if it were, so to speak, an autobiography a clef...But *A Question of Power* is not an autobiography' (1994, 97). Certainly Bessie Head's work is more than merely the 'isolation of biographical prototypes' that Hogan seems to suggest comprises autobiography (97). However, she made it very clear that the three novels she wrote in Botswana, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, *Maru* and *A*

*Question of Power* were 'continuous autobiographical records' (20.6.1988 KMM BHP). Of the latter novel she stated that 'I am Elizabeth' (11.8.1982 KMM BHP), while she says that Paulina and Makhaya in *When Rain Clouds Gather* 'are, on the whole, myself and much of what I'd do and say' (5.1.1968 KMM BHP). She said unequivocally that she was an 'author with a self-dialogue and the self-dialogue has dominated in all my books' (undated biographical notes KMM BHP). She said 'I am usually the main lead character...I am usually male' (16.6.1983 KMM BHP).

The reading of any novelist's work as autobiographical remains controversial. This is despite the abandonment of any embargoes the New Critics imposed upon such interpretations, and the wider acceptance that books, as Virginia Woolf said 'are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in' (1945, 43). She might also have added that they are attached to the histories of which we are a part, both social and personal, as well as the forces that control our lives and with which we struggle. For some groups, and some individuals, this struggle is one of survival against almost overwhelmingly powerful odds and can take many and diverse forms, of which autobiographical writing is but one. To devalue whatever form of expression it may take is also to devalue the individual and their experience. There are a number of reasons, however, why autobiographical interpretations of Bessie Head's work can be problematic. Not the least among them is that autobiography is widely held to be a Western form. As a South African, Bessie Head did not inhabit a wholly African milieu. She was also the daughter of an

English mother and an unknown African father, and received her formal education at an Anglican mission school. Until her move to Botswana in 1964, she had lived her life in large, cosmopolitan, South African cities. There, she was subject to all the colonial influences of a country whose initial impact with Europe had taken place in the 1600s. This had resulted in a complex cultural matrix that is paradigmatic of how 'Cultures are not located next to one another...they are situated in a fluctuating context which is a *structured field of relations*' (Lionnet 1995, 17). Within this context, Bessie Head was not only familiar with Western literary forms, but she made no secret of the fact that some of the greatest influences upon her were Lawrence, Pasternak and Brecht, representative of white European male culture. Indeed, so strong was their influence that she felt 'as though all writers are first Russian, British, French, American and only after that universal humanity' (22.1.1972 KMM BHP). Her characters also reflect these influences, as for example in *Maru*, where Margaret Cadmore's education by a white missionary 'ranges from Plato to W.B. Yeats' (20 M).

Nevertheless, Bessie Head thought of herself as a 'highly individualistic writer and I do not think I easily lend myself to a special environment or society' (6.2.1982 KMM BHP). Because of this, she refused to deny either her experience or the influences upon her, and justified her eclectic approach to both life and literature in her typically idiosyncratic and controversial way:

There is the urge towards a kind of closed door nationalism in independent Africa, an urge to reject the colonial experience. But this is not possible. The African personality has been enlarged and changed by the colonial experience. I am not bad or western civilisation [sic]. I simply have a door that stands open and

characters that startle and entrance my readers ('Why Do I Write',  
undated ms. KMM BHP).

In the light of Trinh T. Minh-ha's comments, however, we can see that  
she spoke more pertinently than she is often given credit for:

Whether we choose to concentrate on another culture, or on our own  
culture, our work will always be cross-cultural. It is bound to be  
so...because of the heterogeneous reality we all live today, in  
postmodern times - a reality, therefore, that is not a mere  
crossing from one borderline to the other or that is not merely  
double, but a reality that involves the crossing of an  
indeterminate number of borderlines, one that remains multiple in  
its hyphenation (1991, 107).

Another problematic area in regard to the autobiographical genre  
is that its guardians have been generally male. A woman writer's  
excursion into this territory might thus be unwelcome, leading to  
criticism that her emphasis upon the personal is reductive. It may even  
be suggested that it is lack of imagination and aesthetic control that  
leads her to concentrate on her personal experience. Sometimes such  
criticism is presented in an oblique form, as for example when Patrick  
Colm Hogan (1994) suggests that interpreting the work of non-whites and  
women with recourse to biographical detail is reductionist because such  
detail is 'irrelevant to an understanding of the literary work' (97).  
He says that this is a general point which is 'obvious to everyone who  
interprets the work of white men' (97). There are two points to be made  
about this narrow type of criticism. One is that, as Liz Stanley points  
out, 'Autobiography and fiction...are more than close relations: twin  
sisters under the skin of a different textual guise' (1992, 160). There  
is no question that Bessie Head's books were works of art. Yet to  
suggest that art is incompatible with autobiography, or that either  
autobiography or fiction must conform rigidly to traditional forms and

analysis is in itself reductive. As Roger Poole has said in his work on Virginia Woolf:

On the question, whether or not a novel is 'art' or a part of 'life' or whether there is any permissible literary intercourse between the two, I would like to be quite explicit. The novels of Virginia Woolf are works of art...They are also works which treat of the lived experience of Virginia Woolf (1982, 4-5).

The other point is, as Jane Miller has said, that there is a problem for women writers of autobiography in how to find

a language which will enable me to enter a powerful and male tradition of cultural criticism addressing concerns that I share? For on the one hand that tradition will block all entry to itself so long as my intrusion is represented as sectional in its interest and intent, therefore, only on disturbing and distracting from the truth and universality of these ideas, from the altogether grander history which they illuminate. On the other, a tradition so barbed and fortified against women's appropriation of any of it can hardly, after all, offer an ideal entry into the debate (1990, 121).

Bessie Head felt that her emphasis upon the personal was valid. She was clear that '(I)...recorded what I have learnt from real life...And if life has taught me something, was I not supposed to portray it accurately as I saw it?' (18.11.1978 KMM BHP). That she was able to do so is testimony to her strength, as was her choice not to use the conventional form of autobiography. Her hybrid novel form, often fabular, was far more apposite. As Phaedrus said about fables as long ago as the first century A.D.:

The slave, being liable to punishment for any offence since he dared not say outright what he wished to say, projected his personal sentiments into fables and eluded censure under the guise of jesting with made up stories. (quoted in Petrie 1993, 25).

The oppression that Bessie Head experienced, and that countless others continue to experience, shares the common denominator of power arising from a hierarchical system that maintains the existing relationship

between the labelling and the labelled group (Pieterse, 1992). Because of the convergence of particular personal and general historical circumstances into which she was born, Bessie Head was variously labelled as a woman of mixed race, an orphan, the daughter of a woman designated 'mad' who experienced periods of 'madness' herself, an exile in Botswana, a stereotypical tragic black woman, a victim. When she achieved the status of, and was described as, an African writer, she became deeply suspicious, saying 'as soon as they see black they start exclaiming 'Here is the real Africa' without a clue as to what the book may be about' (1.9.1973 KMM BHP). To be classified as an African writer was to be constrained in a category which simply continued the labelling process to which she was already subjected. Bessie Head's translation into her work of the controlling and imprisoning forces operating upon her life was first recognised by one of her early critics, Arthur Ravenscroft, who said that it was 'impossible to avoid noticing how frequently the words 'control' and 'prison' (and phrases and images of equivalent value) occur in all three novels' (Ravenscroft 1976, 176). South Africa's dominant structures, at their most destructive, did not allow those they labelled and placed outside their boundaries to exist. They also did their best to refuse to acknowledge the humanity of those who continued to do so. Thus, the threat to Bessie Head's existence was one she continued to feel throughout her life. She wrote variously that 'there's a dim chance that I'll be alive to see this year to an end' (quoted in Vigne 1991, 9) and that 'I have lived face to face with death for a whole year' (16.10.1971 KMM BHP). Bessie Head was faced not only with the continual threat against her existence. She was also effectively imprisoned on a metaphorical 'death row' comprised of the

complex web of power relations in which she was enmeshed. The controlling nature of the categories and definitions imposed upon her would continue to constrain and imprison her. Because of the complex nature of her existence, she had also become, in Foucault's terms, someone who

assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he (sic) makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles: he becomes the principle of his own subjection (1977, 202-203).

Bessie Head thus had no choice but to partly accept the oppressor's terms, saying 'It is the duty of the conqueror to abuse you, and treat you like an outcast and alien, and to impose false standards on you' (72 C). She also articulated her right to oppose these terms, and she made this very clear in the statement of intent of that 'dangerous saboteur' Makhaya, in *When Rain Clouds Gather* (19 RC). He says that he seeks to establish a 'living life' against his fear of 'the living death a man [sic] could be born into' (136) in all its 'horrific depravity' (22.10.1973 KMM BHP). For Bessie Head the 'living death' was more than such fear, it was the totality of the sociocultural and personal circumstances into which she was born and which she also embodied as a South African woman of colour. But she was determined to survive and to maintain the 'living life' which, at its most fundamental, was simply the fact that she was physically alive. She said, 'I intend to stay alive...Got to find a level of survival' (quoted by Vigne, 1991, 13) and her determination made her as as dangerous a saboteur as Makhaya. Bessie Head's ability to survive and maintain a 'living life' was in part facilitated by her existence outside the boundaries of 'normal'



white, male-dominated society. As a woman of colour, both invisible, yet also highly visible, constantly experiencing the stigma of living outside societal norms, she was positioned on what has been called a 'social-psychological frontier' (R. Barker, quoted by E. Goffman 1990, 25). She used a variety of spatial or dimensional metaphors throughout her work, whether she spoke of 'the axis of the external world and the internal or soul world' (19.9.1972 KMM BHP) or of boundaries, borders, or crossroads. These were always areas of paradox and liminality, places of transformation and transition, power and magic. Even the village of Serowe in Botswana was an objective correlative of such an area, standing as it does on the edge of the Kalahari desert, in a country on the border with South Africa. Bessie Head felt that Botswana was situated on a 'Bewitched Crossroad' where it was protected from the fate of South Africa. Its significance in her final work was pointed out by Joyce Johnson, and is pertinent to all her writing:

The idea of the crossroad as a meeting-place of divergent pathways is significant in the very structure of the work which looks both towards fiction and history and towards African and Western literary traditions. (Johnson 1990, 126).

The significance of crossroads for Bessie Head is also one that is found in the work of other African writers. For example, Chinua Achebe said that Africans

...lived at the crossroads of cultures. We still do today, but when I was a boy one could see and sense the peculiar quality and atmosphere of it more clearly...But still the crossroads does have a certain dangerous potency; dangerous because a man might perish there wrestling with multiple-headed spirits, but also he might be lucky and return to his people with the boon of prophetic vision (Achebe 1975, 67-68).

Bessie Head was aware of the dangerous potency of her own situation between apparently opposing yet closely linked and ambiguous states, whether of her existence itself, her place in history or her peculiar literary position. These were not static states since

All culture...far from being a given, is the result of continual negotiation with the external world, negotiation through which, like a horizon, *an identity is affirmed which can only be defined as an ongoing creation* (Lionnet 1995, 78-79).

By using the omniscient, third person narrative point of view, Bessie Head created an appropriate space from which to write. She described this in terms of

...a kind of coolness and detachment in my work...The cool stance means; you are up on a horizon, you have the biggest possible view. The storyteller has to have that. It's not so much a question of being black as of having got control of life's learning...I shape the future with this cool stance, the view that's above everything (quoted in MacKenzie and Clayton 1989, 12-13).

Bessie Head situated her writing in a paradoxical space where, although she was not allowed to survive, she nevertheless asserted her right to continue to do so. From such a perspective she was able to distance herself from her experience while neither rejecting nor denying it, and to remain open to all the influences upon her in the part of Africa that had both created her and tried to destroy her. So powerful was the process of translating her experience into her writing that she felt 'It was almost as if the novels wrote themselves, propelled into existence by the need to create a reverence for human life in an environment and historical circumstances that seems to be a howling inferno' (Drum Feb 82 KMM BHP). To write directly about her lived reality in a conventional fixed, autobiographical mode of representation would have necessitated her entering this howling inferno and incurring major existential risk.

It is significant that Bessie Head also made her position explicit in the title of the autobiography that she was commissioned to write by Heinemann in 1985, the year before her death. Its title, 'Living on an Horizon', was taken from the writings of the Swami Vivekananda, who, she said 'would make huge summaries of Indian history but often place himself outside the walls of his environment. He liked to say: For myself I always have an horizon' (16.6.1984 KMM BHP). Symbolic of how she saw her place in life, this title was, she said 'definitive of one who lives outside all possible social contexts, free, independent, unshaped by any particular environment but shaped by internal growth and living experience' (31.5.1984 KMM BHP). She never began this work, since by that time she had already written her story, albeit in a different form, and had already told the personal story of her continual negotiation with herself, her history, her social environment, and the history of Southern Africa. In part, her story was a response to the large questions that surrounded her personal existence. She felt, for example, that:

Each human society is a narrow world, trapped to death in paltry evils and jealousies, and for people to know that there are thoughts and generosities wider and freer than their own can only be an enrichment to their lives. But what happens to the dreamer and storyteller when he is born into a dead world of such extreme cruelties that no comment or statement of love can alter them?  
(quoted in MacKenzie 1990, 101)

Throughout her work Bessie Head, dreamer and storyteller, felt able to answer her own question because she had 'authority from life to do so' ('Why Do I Write', undated ms. KMM BHP). This was an authority which enabled her to continually define and redefine the terms of her existence.

Bessie Head's writing was 'a kind of appeal in itself, as a kind of final attempt just to simplify my life' (22.10.1973 KMM BHP). Although never a conventionally political writer, she makes clear her duty to oppose abuse and oppression in her writing, saying 'Maybe we can help throw some of those imposed standards overboard. It is a great responsibility to be a writer at this time' (1993, 72 C). This was a responsibility she took extremely seriously. She embraced the complexities and contradictions of her lived reality and incorporated them into the multilayered preoccupations of her writing, including love, work, power, history, identity, sexuality and sanity. In doing so, she re-presented them more accurately than either a conventional autobiography with its attempted resolutions, or classic narrative realism could ever do. Indeed, as Trinh T. Minh-ha has said 'A form of mediation, the story and its telling are always adaptive. A narration is never a passive reflection of a reality' (1991, 13). The work Bessie Head produced was, then, an unconventional hybrid form which defies categorization. Some of its elements can be described in David Lodge's words:

The non-fiction novel and fabulation are *radical* forms which take their impetus from an extreme reaction to the world we live in...The assumption behind such experiments is that our 'reality' is so extraordinary, horrific or absurd that the methods of conventional realistic imitation are no longer adequate (1971, 33).

My proposal, then, focuses on the 'living death' and 'living life' that are two sides of the central paradox of Bessie Head's lived reality. I aim to show how her writing was the mediating agent between these two apparently opposing states. The work that follows is my personal attempt to honour and interpret her writings in this context

and I want to emphasise that my interpretation, filtered through my own subjectivity, is one version among any number of possible versions. It is, however, one that does not aim to fix and imprison Bessie Head within any static theoretical framework, and uses her own feelings about her work and her life wherever possible. Like Roger Poole's study of Virginia Woolf, my own study

While taking account of works of art... allows itself reference to the life. While referring itself to the life, it does not attempt biography. By approaching the writer as subject, it allows of a psychological understanding, while remaining independent of any school of 'psycho-analytical' theory (Poole 1982, 4).

I have chosen to use a shifting, varied theoretical base, and hope that by doing so I have avoided the categorization and labelling Bessie Head feared so intensely, although I have drawn particularly on the work of R.D. Laing where I have felt it appropriate, since Bessie Head was particularly drawn to him (23.6.1974 KMM BHP). I will examine how, through her characters themselves and their relationship with the seemingly opposing states of 'living death' and 'living life', Bessie Head expressed herself as both the product of a complex history and the producer of her own reality. Throughout her novels, short stories, letters and essays, her fictionalized history of Southern Africa and her account of Serowe through the testimony of its villagers, she illustrates her ability to use her imagination and her creativity to produce works of art that were also appropriate ways for her to tell her own story. What ensues is my interpretation of Bessie Head's work as, in Liz Stanley's description, a "'kaleidoscope': each time you look you see something rather different, composed certainly of the same elements, but in a new configuration' (1992, 158). This is paradigmatic of Bessie Head's core preoccupations with the 'living life' and 'living death'

which are repeated in different ways throughout her work. Of their repetition, I can only cite what has been said of Bakhtin:

If he is repetitive, why should he not be, when what he is saying will surely not be understood the first, or third, or tenth time? When talking about truths like these, once said is not enough said, because no statement can ever come close enough and no amount of repetition can ever overstate the importance of elusive yet ultimate truth' (Booth 1984, xxvii).

In what follows, I have drawn on many of Bessie Head's unpublished letters and papers, and given examples drawn from the full range of her published writings. I have not always chosen to use a strictly chronological method of discussing her writings because, although lives may seem to be lived in such a way, they are also saturated with personal preoccupations, the past, possible futures, others' attitudes, and changing beliefs and circumstances which linear temporality can destroy or distort. I hope that this allows Bessie Head's own interpretations of her experiences and their translation into her writing to be heard. One of her dear friends and long-time correspondents wrote after her death 'I earnestly hope that researchers will not misinterpret her writing' (10.3.1992, KMM BHP) and it has been my intention to avoid this as far as possible. As Norman Denzin has said 'our primary obligation is always to the people we study, not to our project or to a larger discipline' (1989, 83).

## CHAPTER ONE

I WRITE WHAT I AM LIVING (22-23 February 1975 KMM BHP)

### BESSIE HEAD'S WRITING AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

*So you think what you have is your own? What is your own comes to you bit by bit* (Camus, quoted in letter 11.10.1984, KMM BHP).

In this chapter I want to examine the concept of autobiography, its relevance to Bessie Head's creative output as a means of telling her own story and embedding her 'living life' in narrative, and some versions of her life and writings that threatened to impose upon it the stasis of 'living death'. I also want to look at some of the issues and difficulties which arise in the light of criticism which uses a biographical approach

It was one of Bessie Head's earliest critics, Arthur Ravenscroft, who first pointed out that her novels were 'strange, ambiguous, deeply personal books' (1976, 175) with their basis in the 'vast caverns of interior personal experience' (183). Another critic who has acknowledged that 'all three of Head's novels have an autobiographical dimension' is Craig Mackenzie (1989, 14), who stated that these 'three novels form a kind of trilogy in their common focus on the life story and mental anguish of the author' (15). Bessie Head herself said that her three novels, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, *Maru* and *A Question of Power* were 'continuous autobiographical records' (20.6.1980 KMM BHP) in which she was 'usually the main lead character' (16.6.1983 KMM BHP). In them, she said, 'I worked

mainly on my own problems' (6.5.1975 KMM BHP). Of Margaret Cadmore in *Maru* she wrote 'that passive shy girl was my own eyes watching the hideous nightmares which were afflicting me' (3.9.1982 KMM BHP), and she describes Makhaya in *When Rain Clouds Gather* as 'A combination of feminine sensitivity and borrowed maleness. I borrowed the outer male form but I lived inside that form' (9.2.1970 KMM BHP).

After the publication of Bessie Head's third published novel *A Question of Power*, which is the work most widely acknowledged as autobiographical, her focus ostensibly shifted, first into the local community with the research and publication of *Serowe, Village of the Rain Wind* (1981). Some of the pieces she researched for this, but did not include, made up the collection of short stories *The Collector of Treasures and other Botswana Village Tales* (1988) which continued her autobiographical emphasis. For example, Bessie Head said of the short story which gives the collection its name, that 'the life of the woman Dikeledi is more or less my life. My husband was a man like Garasego Mokopi' (16.6.1977 KMM BHP). For the short story 'Looking for a Rain God' she draws on her own experience of being locked up at the Lobatse Hospital after her breakdown with two old women from the village of Kanye who had killed two little girls and cut up their body parts for medicine (28.1.1973 KMM BHP). Even in *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (1986), Bessie Head's strong personal presence is evident, as it is in her final work, *A Bewitched Crossroad* (1984). Of the central character in this



fictionalised history of Southern Africa she said 'For Sebina read Bessie Head - one of the great B. Head male characters, tender, enchanting, flexible and delightful. For Shoshong read Serowe' (Undated letter KMM BHP). Her posthumously published collections *Tales of Tenderness and Power* and *The Cardinals* also transform her personal experiences into narrative, while the hundreds of copies of her personal letters housed in the Khama III Memorial Museum in Serowe communicate more directly her experiences to her many correspondents.

Although Bessie Head was clear about the autobiographical nature of her work, there are a number of reasons why others might disagree. Not least of these is that the autobiographical genre is held to be European in origin, and Bessie Head was a South African. She was also a woman, and the genre has traditionally been predominantly male-authored; for example early central figures who have come to prominence through their use of the confessional form and the authoritative 'I' have included Montaigne, St. Augustine, and Rousseau. However there have been, although frequently overlooked, autobiographies by women writers dating as far back as the 1160s as well as autobiographies that pre-date contact with the West, while others are 'connected to indigenous traditions which cannot be dismissed as being "transplanted"' (Friedman 1988, 56). The European male tradition, then, would not appear to have had such an exclusive relationship with the autobiographical form as is commonly supposed. Nevertheless, those whose lives are considered noteworthy have achieved success according to conventional standards which is, as Stanley (1992)

points out, a political issue. That a new canon is in the process of formation is also, as she says, a 'highly political process' (4).

There are, of course, broadly political reasons why Bessie Head did not attempt to tell her life story in a conventional, linear way, and why her work is rarely characterised by the first person narrative form associated with the autobiography, although she uses the first person in some of her essays and, of course, in her letters. The first person narrative convention, as Liz Stanley (1992) points out, tells us that to know who we are we must be part of an identifiable, historical lineage, be in possession of factual knowledge about its members, and present an objective, absolute 'truth' based upon individualistic models. Issues of 'truth' and 'fact' loom as perennially large over biography and autobiography as they do over lived reality, although 'of course everyone now accepts that 'truth' about the totality of a life all depends on the viewpoint from which it is examined' (6). Those who lack continuity or 'factual' knowledge about their lives, or have been placed in the margins of the dominant discourse, but who nevertheless want to assert their right to express their experiences, articulate their sense of themselves, and define their own place, may choose to use the conventional form as best they can, but they are also free to adapt existing forms. It is particularly significant in this context that there has been a recent proliferation of autobiographical writings in South Africa, and that this is described as

part of the autobiographical impulse of an entire country engaged in a process of bringing the past into proper perspective in a 'drama of

self-definition'... a nation's textual creation of itself in the course of identifying itself...(Jacobs 1991, 1).

Some of the individuals engaged in this process, who have perhaps only recently been allowed to make themselves heard, are choosing to do so through the conventional first person narrative. Bessie Head, however, asserted her right to express her experience in her own way, and invariably used the style and form characteristic of the novel to present aspects of her lived reality, a reality which has caused some contention among her critics.

One of the most problematic issues which arises when a writer is, as Bessie Head was, particularly open about their life, is the use critics make of the information available to them. She said 'I am always forced to give biographical information so everything on me begins rather pathetically: 'Bessie Head was born the 6 July, 1937, in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa...One had to begin somewhere' (27.12.1983 KMM BHP). Here she locates herself by giving factual information in the form of her date and place of birth, and thus gives her readers information which is verifiable. Beyond this, she was reliant on information given to her by others, from whom she was made aware that she had been fostered shortly after her birth in the Pietermaritzburg Mental Institution where her mother was an in-patient. It was not until after Bessie Head's arrival in Botswana in 1964, when she was required to make information about her parents available to the authorities, that she contacted the

Pietermaritzburg Child Welfare Society who had taken care of her shortly after her birth. She was simply told:

You were born out of wedlock. Your father's particulars are unknown. Your mother was a European woman, Bessie Amelia Emery, who died on 13 September 1943. It is probable from the file that she was a South African citizen (13.5.1964 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head made another attempt to obtain information in 1984, two years before her death, this time for the autobiography she had been commissioned to write by Heinemann (6.6.1984 KMM BHP). Though this, once again, did not result in any new information, her own letter to the Child Welfare Society describes her beliefs about her background, and the strength and depth of her feelings surrounding them:

My mother was a white woman, Bessie Amelia Emery. She had been married and returned to the family home in Johannesburg after a broken marriage. Her family reared race-horses for the Durban July Handicap and my father, a black man, worked in the stables. My mother acquired me from this black man. When the family found this out, they removed my mother from the family home to the Pietermaritzburg mental hospital while she was pregnant and that is where she gave birth to me (25.6.1985 KMM BHP).

In this poignant letter, in which she refers to herself as an acquisition, a thing, rather than a human being, Bessie Head continued:

I am a very independent person, and it was quite acceptable to me that I should grow up with no relatives...The family plan was to obliterate my mother even before she died. She had a grandmother who opposed this. When the family came down for the Durban July Handicap, she insisted on a stop over in Pietermaritzburg so that she could visit both my mother and I. My mother's brother used to shout in great anger at Nellie Heathcote: 'We want to forget this matter but the old lady won't let us!'. To him it was in order to pack a human being away forever in a mental hospital (25.6.1985 KMM BHP).

Here, Bessie Head locates her life first in absence, then in the threat of the obliteration of the woman who gave birth to her. The contradiction between her stated acceptance of her position and the strength of the term

'obliterate' is striking. In using such a powerful term to describe what she believed to be her white mother's fate, she also indicated her feelings about her own right to exist. She was the child of a sexual union perceived as unlawful under South Africa's 1927 Immorality Act forbidding intercourse between all whites and Africans, and although the children of such unions were not in themselves classed as illegal, she was aware that she was the result of an illegal liaison. The circumstances surrounding her conception and birth thus ensured that her original place in the world was infused with a sense of primary guilt at being alive, a sense of having no right to life. Elbaz (1987) argues that every biographer or autobiographer must start with the family, where the zero point of the life in question begins, which means that Bessie Head's initial positioning was a problematic starting point around which to structure any story of her life.

The biographical details that Bessie Head gave are repeated in some of the most recent criticism. For example, Lionnet reiterates that she was the 'mixed race daughter of a wealthy South African woman of Scottish descent and a black stable boy. Her mother had been committed to the asylum because of the interracial love affair' (1995, 122). That this information may not have been objective fact which could not be confirmed by official documents would ordinarily matter little, since its importance lay in Bessie Head's belief that it was true and the effect this had upon her sense of herself. Denzin paraphrases Sartre's belief that 'if an author thinks something existed and believes in its existence, its effects

are real' (Denzin 1989, 25). Because autobiography is generally considered to be based on 'truth' and Bessie Head's story sounds almost like the stuff of fairy tales, it may be considered that to read her work as fictional is appropriate, particularly since it has been said that:

...the generic task of the novel is to portray the history of individual lives, accounting for and sketching human subjectivity by relating it to origin, the genre itself may be considered a version of what is usually taken as a specific instance of the form: the family romance, which, Freud says, 'serves as the fulfilment of wishes and as a correction of actual life' (Van Boheeman 1987, 24).

In Freudian interpretations, fictional characters are seen as split-off fragments of their author's ego; in other views they appear as versions of identities or alienated parts of the writer's identity. Fiction can thus provide an alternative way of living through the imagination, and as such, could have perhaps comfortably accommodated Bessie Head's re-presentation of her personal experience.

The interpretation of Bessie Head's work to which I am about to turn leads her readers to an interpretation of her work as 'family romance' (Gardner 1986, 122) on the one hand, and total fabrication on the other. Susan Gardner's biographical memoir, 'Don't Ask for the True Story' was published in *Hecate* shortly after Bessie Head's death and highlights some of the dangers of biographical interpretations. Gardner was a member of *Hecate's* editorial board (Dovey 1989, 30), which gave her the power of academic authority to claim superior knowledge of her subject, and which enabled her to succeed, for a time at least, in raising doubts about Bessie Head's own version of her early life. Craig MacKenzie, for example, refers

to the article by pointing out that 'some doubts about the truth about her life story have recently been voiced' (1989, 11). He attempts to distance himself from the debate by stating that it is not his task 'to offer the reader a definitive version of Bessie Head's origins, or to vouch for the absolute veracity of the version that she herself offers' (4). His acceptance that there might indeed be an 'absolute veracity', a 'definitive version' indicates, however, that a belief in the static nature of truth still pervades academic life and this inevitably influences any discussion on biography and autobiography. Yet, whether it is possible to lay claim to the absolute truths of our pasts is questionable. For example, 'McCarthy suggests that only comparatively rarely are lives deliberately fictionalised' (Stanley 1992, 62) although this enlightened view did not stop her stating, with reference to the writings of Lillian Hellman, that 'Every word she writes is a lie, including "and" and "the"' (McCarthy quoted in Denzin 1989, 68). One reason for distortion may be, as Stanley points out, because memory withholds the key to the past and

Because memory inevitably has limits, the self we construct is necessarily partial; memory ties together events, persons and feelings actually linked only in such accounts and not in life as it was lived; it equally necessarily relies upon fictive devices in producing any and every account of the self it is concerned with (1992, 62).

When a life story is told by a third party in the course of a biographical construction, both subject and reader are dependent upon the biographer's willingness to accept that they are not the possessors of the total and unequivocal truth. Gardner's article is entitled 'Don't Ask for

the True Story', which, on the one hand could indicate her acceptance that there can be no 'true' story of Bessie Head's life. But on the other, Gardner clearly states that her aim is to unpick 'a legend...which almost everyone still believes' (1986, 111) and to replace 'the pathos of the life-story she would tell again and again, obsessively' (114) with a story 'more incredible than any Bessie had ever told' (122). While claiming that the story Bessie Head told about her own life 'seemed almost too "good", in its horrible way, to be true' (115), Gardner aims to replace what she called the 'ideal biographical legend' (115) with her own version at the heart of which, she claims, lies a secret which she can never reveal. As Dovey states:

While the existence of a secret is the source of the narrative, the gesture of withholding this secret 'knowledge' is the source of Gardner's power over Head. The secret of Head's identity is, in Felman's words, that knowledge of the Other which has to be appropriated, taken from the Other. It can be argued that claiming to possess the secret of the Other's identity constitutes the ultimate gesture of power over the Other (Dovey 1989, 34).

Gardner uses her own power to attempt to dismiss what Bessie Head saw as the most important and meaningful factors in her background as 'commonplaces about Bessie's life that she may herself have believed, but which were not true' (1986, 112) and she uses three distinct strategies in order to do so.

The first strategy is that she immediately establishes an intimate and also a superior relationship with Bessie Head which serves to reinforce her existing authorial power, and which begins with a description of herself and her subject, walking hand in hand in the



Botswana heat. Her second strategy is to undercut any positive statement she makes about Bessie Head with a negative one, a pattern which she repeats throughout her article, as for example when she later claims that this intimate relationship was, in fact, 'disquieting' (112) to her, and had been 'immediately established' (112) by Bessie Head herself. Her third strategy is to remind the reader that Bessie Head's fame rested largely upon an autobiographical novel about her 'harrowing mental breakdown' (110). She points out that her own reason for wanting to meet the writer was because she did her Master's degree on "'mad" women writers' (111). It is within this derogatory and dismissive category that she then proceeds to embed Bessie Head by describing her as loudly proclaiming the cleanliness of her vagina in a hotel dining room and juxtaposing Bessie Head's 'ravenous' appetite and her heavy drinking of 'Long Tom beers from dawn to dusk' (110) with her own inability to eat, and to drink only Appletisers because of the intense heat. She also questions why, when at the time of her visit Bessie Head was a writer of international reputation, no-one appeared to know where she lived. She asks why 'this woman, who has made this village so uniquely her own...seems to be ostracised' (111).

The cumulative effect of these statements leads the reader to the assumption that the writer is indeed ostracized, and that this is because she establishes inappropriately intimate relationships with virtual strangers, is a public embarrassment, and eats and drinks too much. In short, Gardner carefully constructs a 'mad' personality for her subject before she begins her investigation into Bessie Head's version of her

early circumstances, which she obtained without the latter's permission or knowledge. She justifies her intrusion into Bessie Head's background by saying 'In this article I have followed a methodology used by Bessie herself for, as she told us in Serowe, one of her interviewees once asked her not to reveal what he said, "and of course I wrote it"' (127).

Accusing Bessie Head of naïvete in having never tried to trace her mother, she points out that in South Africa everyone is 'eminently traceable' and goes on to claim that she had confidential information about the writer's background which proved that she belonged to 'a prominent South African family' (124). She then suggests that Bessie Head had 'no interest in documenting a truth which she may have known anyway' (122), that she 'was not born in the Fort Napier mental hospital in Pietermaritzburg, nor had her mother been a patient there' (122-3). Gardner continues 'Having given her infant daughter all that she could, Bessie Emery handed her over to foster care. And disappears from the scene' (124). However, as Gardner has pointed out, everyone in South Africa is 'eminently traceable'. Because of this, verifiable information from the South African Archive Service exists which substantiates Bessie Head's own story that her mother was a patient in Fort Napier, that she herself was born there, and that her mother later died there.

I want to turn now to Bessie Head's version of events, and that of her closest living relatives. The following account is thus a combination of objective fact and subjective interpretation. Certain objective facts about Bessie Head's life history have been confirmed by publicly available

and verifiable information which I gained from the South African Archive Service in the form of Birth, Marriage and Death certificates. In this context, the agreement between Bessie Head's statements and official documentation constitutes her own 'truth'. My purpose in tracing this information was to attempt to corroborate what Bessie Head herself had said, since it was obviously so important to her, and because it had been dismissed as fabrication. The information I obtained was confirmed by Ronal Emery, the half-brother Bessie Head never knew she had. It has also subsequently been enlarged upon by Kenneth Birch, her mother's brother, who has since published his own memoir of events in the monograph *The Birch Family: An Introduction to the White Antecedents of the late Bessie Amelia Head* (1995). All these sources make clear that Bessie Head's mother was indeed institutionalised in the Fort Napier Mental Hospital, Pietermaritzburg, that Bessie Head was born there and fostered shortly thereafter. It also makes clear that Mrs Emery had first been hospitalized some years prior to her daughters' birth there in 1937.

Bessie Amelia Emery's family originally came from Wimborne, Dorset, in England. Her mother, Alice Mary Besant, had married Walter Birch in Southampton in 1892 before the couple left for South Africa (Death Notice of Alice Mary Birch) where Walter Birch then worked as a painting contractor (personal correspondence to the author from Emmerentia van Rensburg 21.2.1993). The couple had three sons and four daughters including Bessie Amelia, who married an Australian, Ira Garfield Emery on 23 March 1915 (Marriage Certificate). Kenneth Birch states that the

couple's first child, named Stanley, was born on 1 December 1915 and that in 1919, when their second child Ronal was ten months old, Stanley, now aged 4, was run over and killed by a taxi in front of his mother on the street where they lived (Birch 1995, 8). Kenneth Birch puts his own interpretation on his sister's subsequent behaviour thus: 'behind the apparently simple façade, a cauldron of rage, frustration and devastation was indubitably heating up' which gave rise to 'some very, very explosive displays' (9). The Emerys' marriage ended in divorce in 1929, and Ronal was initially placed in Mrs Emery's care, though a boarder at school (Document from Supreme Court of S. Witwatersrand Local Division). Kenneth Birch reports that by 1931 his sister, nicknamed 'Toby' had become difficult and at times violent. Her behaviour resulted in her being committed to the Pretoria Mental Hospital on 26 August 1933 (Notice of Admission, Mental Disorders Act 1916), where she was described as suffering from a condition described as 'Dementia Praecox', the old name for schizophrenia (Death Notice of Bessie Amelia Emery).

The personal tragedy of the death of her son must have had a tremendous impact on Mrs Emery's life, and intense, unresolved grief can result in extreme behaviours which psychiatrists are apt to label as pathological when they are often socially intelligible. However, Mrs Emery was considered sufficiently improved to be discharged in August 1934. Kenneth Birch is able to cast light on her movements between her discharge and her final admission to Fort Napier:

In 1935 and 1936 she went on holiday to Durban, under the aegis of her younger sister, then living there. In 1937 the same procedure

was followed. About April 1937 the news came from the Durban daughter, Edith, that sister Toby was in an interesting condition. Mrs Birch was soon on her way to Natal to take charge. On the advice of the family doctor and solicitor (Wilfred Fearnhead) her mother placed Toby in the Fort Napier Mental hospital, Pietermaritzburg in May (Birch, 1995, 10).

According to Kenneth Birch, the news that Mrs Emery's child was 'coloured' came as a shock to the Birch family who had 'thought that the father would have been white' (11). Whether Mrs Emery remained institutionalized because of the birth of her 'mixed race' child, or because of the strength of feeling surrounding mental illness, or simply because her illness had become too much of a burden for her family to bear can only be matters of conjecture. Given the racial climate in South Africa at that time it is unsurprising that Bessie Head believed it was because of her mother's relationship with a black African that she remained in Fort Napier. Correspondence states that by 1940 Mrs Emery was judged to be 'practically normal in most everyday matters' other than she was inclined to be rather extravagant...as regards money matters' (Bond of Security No. 50/40). She was able to receive visits from her son around this time, as well as from Mrs Birch, her mother, who sent the sum of £3 a month to the Pietermaritzburg Child Welfare Society for the maintenance of her grandchild (Pietermaritzburg Child Welfare Society 14.12.1940). Bessie Head remembered being visited by her grandmother (Stead Eilersen 1996) and Kenneth Birch confirms that his mother visited her daughter in Pietermaritzburg and, whilst there, would also call on Nellie Heathcote (1995). He goes on to say that from 1937 to about 1950 (up to her 80th year) Mrs Birch orchestrated decisions affecting the maintenance and

education of her grandchild, the Child Welfare Society and the foster parents (11). Mrs Birch died in February 1964 at the Kensington Sanatorium, Johannesburg, at the age of 92 years 4 months (Death Notice). Mrs Emery died in Fort Napier on 13 September 1943 at the age of 47 where the cause of her death was given as a lung abscess (Notice of Death 14.9.1943 Mental Disorders Act 1916, Fort Napier Institution, Pietermaritzburg). Kenneth Birch confirms that 'in 1943 Toby developed a lung complaint and her physical health began to fail. Her sister Dorothy wrote 'Toby said to me "I feel I am finished, and this is what I have got in life for being good"' (11). Bessie Head always believed, in accordance with what she had been told by Nellie Heathcote that her mother had committed suicide (27.12.1983 KMM BHP).

My juxtaposition of these different versions of Bessie Head's life show the complexities and dangers of autobiography and of biographical approaches. Bessie Head's letters, however, show a different side to the relationship between herself and Gardner which has an important bearing on Gardner's attitude and Bessie Head's response to it. They reveal that she was initially amused by Gardner's interest, saying in a letter to Ezekiel Mphahlele that 'During six months of correspondence with Ms Gardner I got the feeling that I had suddenly and hilariously been promoted to the 'Bushman Curio Dept' of the University of Witwatersrand' (29.9.1983 KMM BHP). But it would appear that over time Gardner's interest in Bessie Head became very disturbing to the writer, and her letters show that she developed strong feelings of antipathy towards her: 'All that

Bessie, Bessie eagerness was for what she was going to get out of me' (24.6.1983 KMM BHP). In part, Bessie Head had come to feel ill-used by academics. She felt she had given freely of her time to them and initially she had been happy to do this, but gradually she came to feel that they despised her as a 'self-made writer' (18.6.1983 KMM BHP) whilst using her interviews as a means of advancing their own careers. She felt strongly that grants and allocations of funds were made available for people to come and study her, while she gave her time for nothing and was, compared to them, desperately poor. Her feelings towards Gardner went beyond this, however. She felt that 'The lady was sharp and rapacious but she frightens me too because her behaviour is wildly illogical...I think the lady is mentally ill. She said some sick things to me in her letters to me' (21.6.1983 KMM BHP). She wrote that Gardner classified her as 'a mentally ill writer who wrote mentally ill books. In the end I could stand it no more' (28.7.1983 KMM BHP). Gillian Stead Eilersen states in her biography of Bessie Head that Gardner, 'With the well-trained academic's highly developed sense of propriety...asked Bessie's permission before every move she made' (1996, 254) and suggests that it may have been Gardner's 'painstaking correctness' and 'startling efficiency' that was later to 'unnerve' Bessie Head (255). However, Bessie Head would have certainly been perceptive enough to be aware of Gardner's intentions towards her: that of turning her into an object of study as a 'mad' woman writer. She had a highly developed and vulnerable sensitivity to being treated as an object, whether by the state or by individuals, because of her status as a woman of mixed race, born in a mental institution,

daughter of a woman designated mad, and carrying the burden of prophesy that she herself would one day become mad. While many critics, including Gillian Stead Eilersen, frequently label the writer's behaviour as indicative of 'mental instability' and 'obsession' (256), Bessie Head herself explained in a personal letter that she had 'a horrid way of behaving when I am discomforted, so I just simply avoid people who discomfort me' (5.10.1973 KMM BHP). In June 1983 Bessie Head came to the point where she was so discomforted that she wanted no further contact from Gardner, and wrote to her saying 'Any further correspondence from you will be returned unopened. Should you make a mistake of trying in any way to contact me or approach me I will write a letter of complaint to the university administration' (18.6.1983 KMM BHP).

Gardner's article shows that there was considerable substance to Bessie Head's increasing discomfort and indeed fear of her. For example, she quotes a nameless friend, a 'Transkeian psychiatrist and well-known biographer' (1986, 122) to whom she has related the opening pages of *A Question of Power* and who says 'All my black psychotics (my emphasis) claim they have a white parent. Even family romance and schizophrenia take a racial form in South Africa' (122). This psychiatrist knows 'psychotics' in the same way as the colonialists who said 'I know my natives', a claim which, as Achebe points out, implies two things at once:

(a) that the native was really quite simple and (b) that understanding him and controlling him went hand in hand - understanding being a pre-condition for control and control constituting adequate proof of understanding (Achebe 1975, 5).



Gardner continued to undermine Bessie Head further by appropriating her relationship with the writer Ezekiel Mphahlele

with the thick file of correspondence between her and me (for I had kept copies of everything), I went to 'Zeke' Mphahlele who, as a fellow Black writer, had been initially suspicious (for Bessie Head had also written to him). He read the entire file and changed his mind... Nobel prize nominee, 'story-teller, play-wright, poet... and myth-maker', decoloniser of the English-language, he is a cherished friend, and his impartial humanity throughout that dreadful time was a continual sustenance (1986, 127).

Gardner thus claims that her version of Bessie Head's life is based upon personal knowledge and authoritative research, backed up by a representative of the medical establishment, as well as by an internationally known writer who had also known Bessie Head. She also called her work a memoir, a record of events which, since it was made after Bessie Head's death, takes the form of an obituary, a document which makes a public statement at the close of a life. It can thus be seen as a closed text containing the last word on an individual's character and achievements. As Denzin points out, an obituary, whether that of a well-known person or of someone important only to their own immediate family and friends

recognizes that each individual's life is itself a singular accomplishment which demands recognition. That achievement, summed up in the activities and experiences of the person, is all that the person is or ever was. This named entity, this person who is dead, is now brought before us in full biographical garb (1989, 80).

Whether this biographical garb diminishes the individual or attempts to show them in all their richness and complexity is ultimately the decision of the biographer or critic concerned, and it also reflects their own motives.

Although an extreme example, Gardner's article is nevertheless paradigmatic of how conventional biographical approaches can be destructive of their subject's essential humanity, with all the complexities and contradictions that involves. Rather than approaching their subject's life and experiences from many directions, and seeking to see how their 'truth' is created or freed through the medium of writing, they seek instead to fix or negate their subject's reality, to impose a 'living death' upon it. If the biographer's subject is no longer alive, and thus unable to counter any perceived misinterpretation of their life and experiences, then the biographer's interpretation can solidify into the definitive version. Once imprisoned within a framework constructed by their biographer, the subject's own construction of themselves is distorted, perhaps even destroyed. Gardner approached Bessie Head's life from a single perspective, and it was she who shaped the story she told about the writer by choosing and isolating certain incidents which then served as the basis of her reconstruction of Bessie Head's personality and personal history. As such, it is a striking example of an exercise in power and dominance.

A similar example of the power of the biographer to reconstruct their subject, and thereby to influence the reading public, is given by Liz Stanley in regard to the life of the South African writer Olive Schreiner, produced after her death by her husband, Samuel Cronwright-Schreiner. Olive Schreiner was a feminist intellectual and activist who lived out many roles; however, Cronwright-Schreiner chose to erase her many positive

qualities and achievements and to construct for her instead a static identity. He depicted her as a "divine child" (1924, 234) who, although she had a 'great side' (239) was 'unlike other people', (237) and was 'a perfectly helpless human being' (239). He justified his position by laying claim to a superior, intimate and thus implicitly unchallengeable knowledge of her. Since, as Stanley points out 'much of the evidence he used no longer exists' (1992, 183) his work became a major source of information for later researchers, including the biography by Ruth First and Ann Scott written in 1980. Cronwright-Schreiner had a powerful voice with which to not only influence other readers but further, to publicly erase a complex life story and, like Gardner, to replace it with his own fiction under the guise of truth, fact and authority. Like Gardner, he attempted to render his subject less important than his own monolithic viewpoint.

Bessie Head's openness undoubtedly left her vulnerable to the fixed interpretations of certain critics who chose to impose their own 'truth' upon her life and work. Such 'truth' is frequently polarized into extremes of unremitting misery or of optimism. For example, Cecil Abrahams speaks of the 'tragedy of Bessie Head's painful existence' (Abrahams 1990, 10) as if that was the totality of her experience. Yet positive and optimistic interpretations impose upon both Bessie Head and her characters as much of a static role as do negative interpretations. Arthur Ravenscroft saw Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* as 'worn down yet regenerated and incredibly alive still after her long ordeal' (1976, 175). He goes on to

describe Makhaya as finding himself towards the end of *When Rain Clouds Gather*, while he sees Maru as finding rest in his 'deep love' (182) for Margaret at the close of the novel. What critics often fail to appreciate is that a life, and the work which is a part of it, can be seen from more than one perspective and remains open-ended. As Denzin suggests 'A life, like the stories that can be told about it, never ends' (1989, 80).

Certainly during the course of her life Bessie Head made the organic nature of her work clear, particularly in her reference to *A Question of Power* as 'rough notes for another book that could only grow with my life' (27.7.1983 KMM BHP). The continuing number of articles and studies on her work show that her death has not halted the process that her work itself began, although sadly they often counter her statement that 'once one is dead they will have nothing to tear to pieces any more' (3.6.1974 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head's work is neither ultimately wholly optimistic and expressive of 'resilience, reconstruction, fulfilment' (Ravenscroft 1976, 179) nor of disintegration and victimisation. It asserts her engagement with 'a living life' and her struggle against the 'living death', and both are representations of her experience, with all its ambiguity and complexity. Writing on the horizon of 'living life' and 'living death' she could acknowledge fully what she called 'The Horror, the Horror' (she went on to say 'this latter favourite I picked up from Conrad!') (5.4.1983 KMM BHP) whilst also allowing herself sufficient latitude to exercise her impulse to free herself from imprisoning definitions imposed upon her by

more powerful others. Her own version of her life shows that certain of her beliefs about her personal history were accurate, and although she was to remain in ignorance of the minutiae of circumstances surrounding her birth and her mother's life, the few facts she was able to acquire were central to her sense of self. What little information she possessed informed her need to 'keep my own life central to everything else because I started off life with everything wrong' (27.3.1973 KMM BHP). She described poignantly how this both linked her to others but also placed her in an isolation that could be a strength as well as a source of pain:

There must be many people like me in South Africa whose birth or beginnings are filled with calamity and disaster, the sort of person who is the skeleton in the cupboard or the dark and fearful secret swept under the carpet. The circumstances of my birth seemed to make it necessary to obliterate all traces of a family history. I have not a single known relative on earth, no long and ancient family tree to refer to, no links with heredity, or a sense of having inherited a temperament, a certain emotional instability or the shape of a fingernail from a grandmother or a great grandmother. I have always been just me, with no frame of reference to anything beyond myself (undated ms for publication in Drum February 1982 KMM BHP).

The obliteration of Bessie Head's family history, her limited knowledge of her mother, her birth within the confines of a mental institution, her further imprisonment in the categories of others, her awareness of her mother's emotional injury, the prophecies concerning her own sanity, and the hardship of her life in foster care, were all elements of the 'truth' of her existence. Her orphanhood alone would have been critical to the sense of 'living death' which Makhaya refers to in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, since there is evidence that those who lose one or both parents early engage in a lifelong quest not only for love and affection, but for

answers to questions about the

helplessness, lovelessness, despair and, especially, fear of their own early death that follow on their loss by embarking on the risky and dangerous search for truth that others would be too fearful, too anxious, to investigate (Simpson 1988, 172).

The melancholia that can attend such loss is described by Julia Kristeva's description of 'living death' which echoes Bessie Head's own:

A life that is unlivable, heavy with daily sorrows...a devitalized existence that, although occasionally fired by the effort I make to prolong it, is ready at any moment for a plunge into death. An avenging death or a liberating death, it is henceforth the inner threshold of my despondency, the impossible meaning of a life whose burden constantly seems unbearable, save for those moments when I pull myself together and face up to the disaster. I live a living death, my flesh is wounded, bleeding, cadaverized, my rhythm slowed down or interrupted...Absent from other people's meaning, alien, accidental with respect to naive happiness, I owe a supreme, metaphysical lucidity to my depression. On the frontiers of life and death, occasionally I have the arrogant feeling of being witness to the meaninglessness of Being, of revealing the absurdity of bonds and beings (1989, 4).

Kristeva's description of 'living death' which echoes Bessie Head's own recurs throughout her four novels, which read chronologically as a linked quartet in which she recasts her experience as one of the defining motifs of her life and work. *The Cardinals*, Bessie Head's posthumously published first novel, and the only one to be written in South Africa, has as its main character the silent, passive, orphaned journalist Mouse, left in a Cape Town slum by a mother who subsequently commits suicide. While Mouse seems to embody the 'living death', she also struggles to maintain a 'living life' not only against the circumstances in which she finds herself, but also against the almost overwhelming and ambiguous desires of Johnny, her would-be lover and, unbeknown to both of them, her biological

father. Johnny, however, acknowledges Mouse's 'living death' and suggests that there is an alternative, saying 'You don't have to start living all at once. Bit by bit would be quite enough' (88 C). In Bessie Head's next novel *When Rain Clouds Gather*, the first she wrote and published in Botswana, Mouse has evolved into Makhaya, who has chosen to escape from South Africa, crossing 'no man's land' (10 RC), a space familiar to Bessie Head as a woman of colour who felt she had no home. He aims to establish a 'living life' in Botswana, but although he successfully escapes the country of his birth, it is apparent throughout this novel that he cannot escape the 'living death' of his experience so easily. For example, he walks up to Matenge's house feeling as 'if he would just be swallowed up by a monster and would not mind' (188 RC). The 'living death' is also expressed in the novel's ambiguous ending which emphasises Makhaya's insubstantiality, and it is present in the hollow feeling inside, of which both Makhaya and Mma-Millipede speak. It is repeated in the 'large hole' that Margaret Cadmore of *Maru* experiences at the centre of herself in Bessie Head's second published novel, *Maru*, completed in 1969 and published in January 1971. Here, she once again documents her own life and death struggles against both internalised and external forces through the struggles of both Maru and Moleka for dominance over the orphaned 'Masarwa' Margaret Cadmore.

Bessie Head's characters are frequently interchangeable; their individual identities are not as significant as their embodiment of their creator's own experience and her use of them in her struggle to maintain a

dynamic balance between the 'living life' and 'living death' . That some of her characters are based on real life counterparts is less important than her own presence as expressed in the contradictions of mood, relationships and other of their aspects. Her use of the third person narrative form allowed her to move through her fictionalized characters, whether male or female, with a fluidity that more accurately expressed the complex truths of her life and experience than any other form would permit. Her need to remain true to her own experience and adequately convey her reality as she perceived it meant that she could not rewrite her life as family romance, or reinvent her experience in any wholly idealized way. Thus, whether her writings resemble what we generally interpret as the literal truth is almost beside the point. As Liz Stanley suggests:

Both biography and autobiography lay claim to facticity, yet both are by nature artful enterprises which select, shape and produce a very unnatural product, for no life is lived so much under a single spotlight as the conventional form of written auto/biographies suggests (1992, 3-4).

A conventional autobiographical form was not a realistic medium to convey the range and depth of Bessie Head's experiences. Moreover, if, as has been suggested, autobiography is an attempt to recapture the self - 'in Hegel's claim, to know the self through "consciousness"' (Gusdorf quoted in Benstock, 1988, 11) then the implications of 'recapturing' a self would be to imprison herself further within a framework not of her own making. Autobiography is also described in Gusdorf's terms as 'the mirror in which the individual reflects their own image' (15). Reflections of Bessie



Head's own image, inevitably containing the reflections of others' images of her, would further imprison her. On the other hand, however, autobiography can be described, according to psychoanalytic theories, as a transitional activity in which everything functions as extensions or recreations of the writer's self. Bessie Head was a woman who was intensely concerned with her sense of self, and she constructed in her personal form of autobiography a series of transitional areas, for example borders, boundaries, crossroads, and horizons. In these liminal areas, primarily places of transformation, she struggled with and transformed her experiences of 'living life' and 'living death' into narratives intended not directly to recreate or reproduce her life, but to express and communicate aspects of a self and a reality constantly under threat not only from the dominant order but also from her own internalization of such threat. Through the act of writing she was able to maintain her position on the point of transition, a space which represented an area of 'living life' where she was free from the definitions imposed upon her by the classification and categorization of others. Behind the characters who represent the 'living death', then,

was a shadow behind which lived another personality of great vigour and vitality. She raised her hand to hide this second image from sight, but the two constantly tripped up each other...You were never sure whether she was greater than you, or inferior, because of this constant flux and inter-change between her two images (71 M).

Thus Bessie Head was not only the embodiment of the 'living death' of the shadow personality, she also possessed the shifting qualities which enabled her to transmute into the 'living life' of its vigorous counterpart.

By using a fictive, often fabular, metaphorical approximation of reality, Bessie Head was able to examine areas of her experience that might have been too painful for her to approach more directly. She needed to allow herself distance, control, freedom of movement, and choice, upon which she placed great emphasis. While these elements in her life were often very limited, she could exercise them through characters who provide objective correlatives for different aspects of her own frequently conflicting states of mind and her different, changing perspectives upon her world. Bessie Head's writing was thus a framing device within which she could locate and articulate a sense of herself in order to express the complexities of her reality. She needed to create the freedom to choose her own method of telling her story rather than impose upon herself the constraints of conventional autobiography, its chronological progression and linear form. By not centering herself in her work after the fashion of conventional autobiographies she avoided some of the difficulties of the autobiographical genre, since it has been considered that

to write 'autobiography' is partially to enter into the contractual and discursive domain of universal 'Man', whom Rey Chow calls the 'dominating subject'. Entering the terrain of autobiography, the colonized subject can get stuck in '*his* meaning'. The processes of self-decolonization may get bogged down as the autobiographical subject reframes herself through neocolonizing metaphors (Smith & Watson 1992, xix).

Although Bessie Head used a form derived from the European tradition she did not 'mime traditional patterns' (xx). Thus, it might be argued that she offers up

an account of the world as seen from the margins, an account which can expose the falseness of the view from the top and can transform the margins as well as the center...an account of the world which treats our perspectives not as subjugated or disruptive knowledges

but as primary and constitutive of a different world (Harstock quoted in Smith & Watson 1992, xx).

Bessie Head preferred to describe her position as on a horizon rather than marginal. This was a personal act of empowerment in which she, as a writer, could acquire a measure of power and control. Thus positioned, she could maintain movement away from both external constraints as well as from those constraints she had internalized.

Denzin points out that:

No reading or writing of a life is ever complete or final. *We must prevent words like autobiography, biography, and biographical method from assuming a force which gives a presence to a centred-life that it cannot have* (1989, 46).

However, by looking at writings in a biographical context it is possible to see them as part of the complex matrix in which a life is lived, and to examine the effects upon a life of social, economic, and historical forces. Denzin suggests that both biographies and autobiographies rest on stories, and that stories are fictions. He goes on to define fiction as something 'made up or fashioned out of real and imagined events' (1989, 41). Through a 'fictionalised autobiography', Bessie Head could choose her method of examining her experience at a safe remove, thereby imposing a measure of artistic control. But if all stories, including those that are autobiographical or biographical, are fictions, then Bessie Head's creative output remains, despite its contradictions, ultimately the repository of her own truth. Finally, it is she who wields authorial power and this was the 'truth' of her existence, her sense of 'living life'.

## CHAPTER TWO

### IDENTITY, MEANING AND PURPOSE

*Who am I? What am I? In past and present, the answer lies in Africa; in part it lies within the whole timeless, limitless, eternal universe. How can I discover the meaning and purpose of my country if I do not first discover the meaning and purpose of my own life? (A Personal View of the Survival of the Unfittest, 149 C).*

There are close links between autobiography and identity; indeed, it has been suggested that 'in autobiography the past is mediated by the present in an ongoing search for identity' (Jacobs 1991, 1). In this light, Bessie Head's writing as autobiography could be seen as a means of conducting a search for an identity, and many critics have interpreted her writing in this way, whether on the part of her characters or for herself. For example, Susan Gardner saw her work as 'a progression from concern with the construction of the self in the first three novels to a grasp of society as a whole' (Gardner 1986, 117). Alain Severac described Margaret Cadmore as 'deprived of an identity by her universality and social alienation' (1991, 59) but achieving an identity through her love for Moleka, though she is forced to sacrifice this by Maru (60). He describes Maru himself as 'alienated from himself by social integration and public consideration' (59). It is Severac's view that 'The fulfilment of this quest for an identity implies a permanent shedding and sacrifice of one's self in pursuit of a better one' (59). Patrick Colm Hogan speaks of the 'causes and results of an unstable personal identity', saying that 'Head scrupulously links the psychotic disaster of personal identity with the repulsive brutality of society' (1994, 110). Certainly the strength and depth of Bessie

Head's preoccupation with her sense of self is apparent across the range of her writing. Indeed, as Dennis Walder has said, 'Nobody born and brought up in South Africa can have escaped the question of identity' (Gurr ed. 1997, 95). However, to suggest that Bessie Head had no identity, that she needed to search for one, that her characters were similarly lacking, and to speak of instability and psychosis in relation to her identity is to perpetuate the attempted negation, the threat of destruction she faced from the dominant group.

In this chapter I want to propose that Bessie Head did not need to search for or construct a sense of identity since not one but a number of identities had already been conferred upon her, even before her birth. As a woman of mixed race in a white-dominated racist society she was inseparable from the categories that the dominant group decreed she should be placed in, and these made up the 'living death' to which Makhaya refers in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. However, Makhaya also seeks a 'living life' which Bessie Head herself pursues through her exploration of the questions 'Who am I? What am I?'. These were rhetorical questions to which she already knew the answers, since she was constantly reminded of them. However, she sought to expand them in order to create for herself a sense of meaning and purpose that went beyond her immediate circumstances, even beyond time and space. In literary representation the search for a self frequently takes the form of an individual's journeying through life, overcoming difficulties along the way, until eventually, after much hardship, they either achieve a hard won 'real' or 'true' self which emerges out of the 'false' self, or integrate a fragmented self. While perhaps as readers

we may need to see life as a search for a self that is ultimately completed, Bessie Head's narratives do not follow such a linear route. Her writing is too full of the oppositions and contradictions that comprised her reality to ever show any sense of resolution.

The system which imposed upon Bessie Head the identity which was a 'living death' had established destructive social and economic conditions for the majority of its population. It was based on a hierarchy of which Sartre, in his introduction to Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1967) asks a question that is still pertinent today:

how can an elite of usurpers, aware of their mediocrity, establish their privileges? By one means only: debasing the colonized to exalt themselves, denying the title of humanity to the natives, and defining them as simply absences of qualities...Colonialist practice has engraved the colonialist idea into things themselves; it is the movement of things that designates colonizer and colonized alike. Thus oppression justifies itself through oppression: the oppressors produce and maintain by force the evils that render the oppressed, in their eyes, more and more like what they would have to be like to deserve their fate. The colonizer can only exonerate himself in the systematic pursuit of the 'dehumanization' of the colonized by identifying himself a little more each day with the colonialist apparatus. Terror and exploitation dehumanize and the exploiter authorizes himself with that dehumanization to carry his exploitation further. The engine of colonialism turns in a circle; it is impossible to distinguish between its praxis and objective necessity (Sartre 1957, xxvi-xxvii).

Since the powerful fear the loss of their power and privilege, any challenge to their dominance by those less powerful or different in any way is likely to be met with the attempt to humiliate or degrade them, even destroy them. The effects of such dehumanization upon colonized peoples severed from their past and culture and unable to participate in that of the colonizer has been described as a 'petrification or

catalepsy' (JanMohamed 1983, 5). While these terms resonate with the 'living death' of which Bessie Head writes, they do not indicate any lack of identity, but rather, they reflect the identity the colonizers have imposed upon them.

Issues surrounding identity are complex ones, then. Judith Kegan Gardiner points out that to engage with the terms 'the self' and 'identity', even within the western literature of which they are an important part, is to be faced with a number of contradictions. Little wonder, then, that the term is often used in a vague way:

Men who are sure they have them fear other men are losing theirs; women with the authority of possession urge other women to seek and find. 'Identity' is a central concept for much contemporary cultural and literary criticism, which, along with its even vaguer terminological twin, 'the self', has become a cliché without becoming clear (1982, 177).

Identity is sometimes described in terms of a fundamental, unchangeable core within an individual that remains recognisable throughout their lives, although the post-modern view is that the self is not a static, measurable structure. Keitel claims that 'identity is usually effected by the unification of present and past experience' which indicates the importance of memory in the creation of identity and emphasises an individual's perception of an encoded event. She also suggests that incompatibility among the 'multiplicity of widely differing roles that we are forced to play' in the present and in the past, some of 'which must be played consecutively...some simultaneously...make it difficult to achieve a sense of unified identity'. Such contradiction among roles might bring about a rejection of them, an attempt to devise new ones, and 'the process becomes extremely problematical' (Keitel 1989,

42). Perhaps the most fluid concept of identity is Derrida's non-centred representation of personhood which deconstructs 'the metaphysics that requires 'centres' and 'points of origin or conclusion' (Sampson 1989, 15), creating the picture of a process which promulgates a 'subject who is multi-dimensional and without centre or hierarchical integration. It would give us a process and a paradox but never a beginning or an end' (15). The self is a physical entity and a psychological construct. This latter can be seen to be divided into self-as-object, which allows us to evaluate ourselves from a more or less detached standpoint, and self-as-process, in which we are engaged in active processes such as thinking, performing, and remembering (Hamachek 1992).

Any discussion about the nature of identity, then, involves a number of interpretative possibilities. With regard to African writers in general, and Bessie Head in particular, the subject of identity becomes even more complex because of the influences of colonization. For example it has been suggested that:

the assumption that the 'self' - which really translates into the 'European self' - is the source of 'truth' about humanity, the model against which all others must be measured and the final arbiter of 'reality'. So pervasive and familiar is this monopolistic way of thinking that we have become habituated to it or, worse, we have capitulated to its expression in multiple forms (Bulhan 1990, 67).

It can be argued that theories about the self do not take into consideration the large number of people for whom the question 'Who am I?' is unlikely to arise, and for whom there is consequently no problem of identity since their objective conditioning renders the 'envisaging of alternative possible futures...a futile, self-delusory exercise'



(Slugoski and Ginsburg 1989, 37). Erikson's psychosocial theory, for example, becomes problematic when taken out of a Eurocentric context since it presupposes

a benign social structure coupled with an implied locus of control, responsibility for any failure to mesh with society's demands and thereby reap its rewards is seen to lie not in the social order but rather within the individual (Slugoski & Ginsburg 1989, 39).

Certainly the over-riding concerns of those subjected to the unjust oppression of apartheid and its legacies, or indeed any other oppressive system are, at their most basic, everyday physical survival and survival of the psychosocial stresses attendant upon it. However, once basic needs are met, new needs arise, and new struggles are engaged in as individuals search for meaning and purpose in their lives. Notions of the self have necessarily entered colonial and postcolonial cultures as a result of the West's cultural-historical dominance, and while some critics might dismiss the relevance of Western theories, they themselves often make assumptions that can be challenged. It has been argued that psychoanalysis, for example, is

... limited in the South African context, for though it can be used effectively to deconstruct the work of white middle-class women, it cannot be used in the same way with the work of black women since the Freudian oedipal 'family romance', which is the basis of its discourse, is derived from the model of the western nuclear family and cannot be used for the extended family in the third world (Lockett 1990, 8).

This extreme position assumes that the term 'third world' is an appropriate one, that it applies to South Africa, and that all families there are extended families. Prescriptive views about the relevance or otherwise of Eurocentric theories often fail to take into account that, whilst there should indeed be debate, there also needs to be an

awareness of the dangers in considering that everything people say, do, feel and think is exclusively determined by their culture, since 'then a false ideology of cultural determinism is set in motion...[This] commits the double fallacy of first reifying an abstraction and then attributing causal power to it' (Rohner quoted by Seedat, 1990, 31).

It is clear that, however we choose to define identity, the question 'Who am I?' appears to have taken on a universal urgency in recent years. It has been said that Erik Erikson concluded that 'the search for identity has become as strategic in our time as the study of sexuality was in Freud's time' (quoted in May 1977, xiv). Christopher Lasch also saw the preoccupation with identity as universal in that it is a response to an increasingly insecure world, where there is little hope that political action will have any impact on a deteriorating global environment and unstable social and economic conditions (1984). It is therefore not unusual that much of what is known as 'postcolonial' writing, although it is of course arguable whether colonialism is ever past but rather continues in more subtle forms, has a pervasive concern with what have been called the 'myths of identity and authenticity' (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 1989, 9). As Gordimer points out

where the legacy of apartheid has been one of domination, a sense of self is bound up with cultural patterns at the broadest level. Similarly, where black and white identities have been ravaged through the false definitions imposed and fixed by systematic racial oppression, another sense of self is critical to the notion of an alternative future. At the social level identity is culture, and this is why politics and culture are so deeply intertwined in South Africa (1988, 9).

In this context, then, it is not necessarily inappropriate for Eurocentric interpretations to be used or adapted in any attempted

resolution of the difficulties encountered by colonized peoples. In such a situation the dominated may accept the conditions imposed upon them, or they may take whatever tools are to hand, wherever they are forged in order to make sense of their plight, to attempt to redefine themselves and to establish a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. This is often undertaken through literature, since as Denzin points out 'stories are shaped by larger ideological forces which put pressure on persons to establish their individuality (and self control) in the stories they construct' (1989, 77).

As a woman, Bessie Head encountered oppressive conditions which are not confined to colonialism. The oppression of women world wide, for example, is well documented, and women in colonial societies are often described as doubly colonized because of their position amid structures which are also patriarchal. This extends to theoretical writings, where they are frequently placed outside the male paradigm for human experience (Kegan Gardiner, 1982) which has been established by, among others, the predominantly male psychoanalytic tradition. Freud said of women that

their social interests are weaker than those of men and that their capacity for the sublimation of their interests is less...the difficult development which leads to femininity [seems to] exhaust all the possibilities of the individual (quoted in Chesler 1974, 72).

According to Erikson, women's identity formation is a lengthy and complex process such that 'it may not be until well past the thirties that vocational, political and religious issues can be resolved' (Marcia quoted in Slugoski & Ginsburg 1989, 38). While this is a view which is 'both reflective and supportive of the dominant institutional order that

gave rise to the phenomenon' (Slugoski & Ginsburg 1989, 38) it is one that is pervasive. Psychoanalysis can be both limited and limiting in other ways. For example, it has been noted that Freud and the post-Freudians saw those they termed 'primitive' as resembling children or those they perceived as mentally disturbed, since earlier stages of human consciousness were recapitulated in childhood. Early in the history of Africa, the character of the African was presumed to be 'as plastic and impressionable as a child's - a blank sheet whereon we may write at will, without the necessity of first deleting old impressions' (Porter 1984, 72).

Despite undoubted difficulties in the application of these views to women in colonial and post-colonial cultures, the theoretical categories psychoanalysis uses to distinguish conscious from unconscious processes and to label and analyse defences are felt to be universal by some feminists. For example, Nancy Chodorow (1989) believes psychoanalysis describes a significant level of reality that is not reducible to, or in the last instance caused by, social or cultural organization. She feels that only a multiplex account that privileges neither social, cultural or psychological phenomena, but is an open web of social and cultural relations, dynamics, practices, identities and beliefs, can shed light on women's experience, and holds that no single factor or dynamic can explain, for example, male dominance. Bessie Head clearly felt that there were aspects of psychoanalysis which were relevant to her own states of mind and of being. She gives some insight into this in a personal letter where she discusses certain of Freud's

theories:

I accept Freud's view of personality as sort of lower ego and super ego. There is a tendency for the lower ego to be insistent about its own needs. A death-like state has the effect of destroying the lower ego so totally, it may result in suicide, so impossible is it to really live without some feeling of self-esteem, but should an excuse present itself to the sufferer, a sort of super personality bursts into life (4.11.1972 KMM BHP).

Although Bessie Head's reading of Freud does not appear to be extensive, this description, with its echoes of his theory of Eros and Thanatos is analagous to the extremes of 'living death' imposed upon her by South Africa's history and her own personal circumstances that was its corollary. It also indicates her awareness that there is an alternative, the 'living life' which she describes here as a 'sort of super personality' with its connotations of extraordinariness and strength that could burst forth should an 'excuse present itself'. Bessie Head thus indicates that she was not prepared to accept the status imposed upon her by the dominant order and for her, issues of identity were full of the complexities inherent in her recognition that 'We are always a combination of a social environment and an internal world, vaguely referred to as a soul' (19.11.1972 KMM BHP). Whether Bessie Head means the soul in the spiritual sense or as the super personality to which she has referred, it is a sense of self defined in terms of an interaction between society and the individual, which for Bessie Head was a continuous process of struggle to maintain the 'living life' and to keep the 'living death' from overwhelming her.

The imagery she used throughout her work to illustrate this process is striking, and includes the adjectives of freezing, burning and suffocation which are also those frequently used by the patients of the

existential-phenomenologist R.D. Laing, and by Laing himself, to describe the desperate attempts of the beleaguered self to survive in an 'unlivable' situation. Bessie Head was familiar with Laing's work, and friends visiting Los Angeles in the 1960s obtained his book *The Divided Self* (undated letter KMM BHP) at her request. Although there is no evidence that she deliberately used his theories in her own work as, for instance, Doris Lessing did in her novel *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), she admired what she called his 'frightening alarm and originality' (3.4.1977 KMM BHP), and felt that his writing had meaning and relevance within her own life, saying:

No one is really inaccessible to him; people are only afraid because they don't understand what is happening to them. He works things to a point where at least he tries to overcome fear...I am very respectful of Laing and Western psychology as developed by him (23.6.1975 KMM BHP).

Laing's work had become popular in the 1960s, when as a practising psychiatrist he sought more humane methods of working with those designated insane, whose treatment at that time was often harsh and applied indiscriminately. Laing differed from other psychiatrists of the time in his more holistic vision of all that we are, which was the result of his turning from orthodox psychiatry to an eclectic combination of Husserl's phenomenology, Sartre's existential ontology and the theories of Americans prominent in the 1930s, including Nathan Ackermann and Gregory Bateson (Adrian Laing, 1997). It was Laing's aim to interpret the nature of psychic distress without recourse to the medical model in which it is seen as a sign of disease. Rather, he saw it as the result of certain workings in a person's nexus of close social relationships, expressive of their personal experience as a social and

political being and their experience of the world and of themselves, which could be understood without recourse to methods of treatment he considered barbaric. Laing perceived the 'inner' as 'our personal idiom of experiencing our bodies, other people, the animate and the inanimate world: imagination, dreams, phantasy, and beyond that to ever further reaches of experience' (Laing 1990, 18). The South Africa which gave Bessie Head her identity was paradigmatic of societies Laing described as 'deathly repressive and deadly dangerous' (1990, 7) and functioned until very recently on the basis of social and political oppression. The power of such societies to define individual identities cannot be underestimated; nor can its power to destroy them. The basic disrespect for life in South Africa arose, as Brink (1983) points out, from the objectification of people which was fundamental to the apartheid system and this has resulted in a climate in which anything can be done to anyone. The proliferation of violent acts which has ensued, including murder and assault, makes South Africa one of the most violent societies in the world and bears witness to this even today, when official apartheid has been dismantled.

Huma Ibrahim claims that 'Head's interest in racism, in spite of her clear, volatile feelings about apartheid, remains entirely academic' (1996, 121). However, her feelings were far from academic. It was apartheid society which gave her identity, and even though she may have attempted to reject the view of herself imposed upon her there by more powerful others, their view as Laing points out,

still becomes incorporated in its rejected form as a part of my self-identity...Thus 'I' becomes a 'me' who is misperceived by



another person. This can become a vital aspect of my view of myself (Laing, Phillipson & Lee 1966, 5-6).

The views of others, which became incorporated into the 'living death' of Bessie Head's identity were complex and codified into law, and resulted in her initially being registered as white at birth. At that time, racial identity was not as rigidly classified as it came to be after the National Party came to power in 1948. The 'Coloured' racial classification came into being in 1950 and Bessie Head was then re-classified in terms of this broad and shifting category which exemplifies how race is an unstable social and cultural construct (Pieterse 1992), having different meanings for different purposes. This was nowhere more apparent than in the category of 'Coloured', which was sub-divided into 'Cape Coloured, Cape Malay, Griqua, Indian, Chinese, "other Asiatic" and "other Coloured"' (Omond 1986, 24). This exemplifies the nature and the power of the dominant group to establish racial identities and then to change them at will. Yet Bessie Head was simultaneously excluded from the dubious luxury of belonging to any clearly delineated racial category, as is made clear in Susan Gardner's biographical memoir 'Don't Ask for the True Story':

Within South Africa, the term 'Coloured', so often applied to her in international biographical dictionaries, also does not apply...The 'Coloured' people form a community which has evolved in its own characteristic language use and cultural customs...Bessie Head never spoke Afrikaans fluently...Thus, she cannot be regarded as a 'Coloured' writer... (1986, 117-8).

While Gardner goes on to say that Bessie Head was not 'Coloured' 'except in the strict, bizarre, hegemonic South African legal sense that she was of mixed descent' (117), she does not question the categories themselves. Rather, she appears to accept the designated racial groups



that were constructed to ensure the continuation of the South African racial elite, and went on to refuse Bessie Head entry to any of them. Thus, South Africa's dehumanizing categorisation which, according to Bessie Head meant that 'There are no people here, only races' (27.12.1976 KMM BHP) was upheld by Gardner and reinforced even after the writer's death. Yet Bessie Head grew up in South Africa with such a sense of fear that she could describe South Africa as a 'frightening world in the sense that people are not expected to have normal feelings but to live out some strange nightmare' (9.5.1978 KMM BHP). Like Makhaya, in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, she was particularly well informed about 'shut-away worlds where the sunlight never penetrated, haunted worlds, full of mistrust and hate' (81 RC). Thus, Bessie Head felt a strong need to protect herself both from the external dangers she lived with daily and which she had also internalized, saying 'Since I only expect the sly and underhand I lived my life very carefully ensuring that I never wanted anything from the people and that I protected myself in every way' (20.12.1983 KMM BHP). The life Bessie Head lived inspired in her a 'terrible fear of people, who deliberately plan to injure others' (22.2. 1976 KMM BHP). In a societal context the kind of fear she experienced meant that she found it difficult to protest against racial injustices although she felt them keenly. She felt, for example, that 'while being well aware of the suffering of black people in southern Africa, I knew I could not cope with the underground intrigues of the liberatory struggle, so I stayed out of it' (21.1.1983 KMM BHP). If a person feels constantly threatened and is unable to do anything about it, they can experience a basic lack of any sense of security in themselves. Laing called this 'ontological insecurity', in which the

individual experiences themselves as 'more unreal than real...more dead than alive' (Laing 1975, 42), but nevertheless dreads their dissolution into non-being. This is illustrated in the characters in Bessie Head's work who are a 'wayward lot of misfits' (23 RC) and have come to live in a 'harsh and terrible country' (115). Having done so, they then 'mentally, fled before this desert ocean' (115). This 'fleeing away from the overwhelming expressed itself in all sorts of ways' (115), particularly in their own insubstantiality as well as the 'wavering, ambiguous world' (81) they occupy. It is present in their need to merge with others, and sometimes it is evident in their need to destroy others lest they themselves be destroyed.

Bessie Head also experienced an isolation which, as a woman of mixed race, constantly disconfirmed by the dominant group, she underwent as another aspect of the 'living death'. This was an inherent part of her sense of identity since we know who we are in part through our interaction, or lack of interaction, with others. This was an isolation both created and shared by the country into which she was born. South Africa is effectively a European colony that still, as Brink points out, feels and writes like part of Europe (1983). It is suffused with what Gordimer calls

the special loneliness of South African life, the loneliness of all of us, black and white, and any-coloured in our society which is not homogeneous, not integrated, where the whites are de-Europeanized and the blacks are detribalized, both are cut off from each other by the colour bar, and there is no community (1961, 46).

The resulting lack of any single South African culture, and the existence of separate groups and separate cultures imposed largely by

colonialists became, according to Brink, the 'South African way of life' (1983, 73) the bedrock of which was isolation itself. Although she wished it were otherwise, Bessie Head appeared able to accept her personal and social isolation, saying:

Though I live in Africa, I do not wish to be cut off, through hatred and fear, from any part of mankind. The sufferings of the past and present are too heavy a burden to bear. I know myself to be cut off from all tribal past and custom, not because I wish it, but because I am here, just here in the middle of nowhere, between nothing and nothing, and though it is a cause of deep anxiety, I cannot alter the fact that I am alone (147 C).

Here, Bessie Head clearly establishes that she has a sense of identity which exists in isolation. In turn, she imposes this upon her characters, for example, Elizabeth, who is 'used to isolation' (56 QP), and Margaret Cadmore who is educated in 'social isolation and lack of communication' (19M).

Bessie Head carried the burden of South Africa's history along with a sense of self which had been determined by and was embedded in a white-dominated, patriarchal, racist milieu which had the power to project upon all those who differed from themselves all their own unwanted aspects; indeed, to disconfirm their very existence. David Smail has observed that

In order satisfactorily to function, we depend, throughout our lives, on the presence of others who will accord us validity, identity and reality. You cannot be anything if you are not *recognized* as something; in this way your being becomes dependent on the regard of somebody else. You may be confirmed, or you may be disconfirmed, and if the latter is the case, often enough and pervasively enough, you simply cease to exist as a person (1985, 18).

The disconfirmation Bessie Head experienced in South African society was underpinned by her own personal circumstances and the prophesy that she

would one day become 'mad' like her mother. This had an impact upon her sense of herself in the context of Laing's investigations which had led him to the observation that lack of genuine confirmation carries with it the constant threat of loss of identity and autonomy. Lacking a sense of autonomy, a person cannot differentiate themselves from others, and thus finds relationships with others and with the world threatening.

Although Bessie Head had little choice but accept the identity she was given, with all its difficulties and complexities, she nevertheless explores possible ways in which identity can be influenced. For example, she compared the 'living death' of South African peoples to the 'living life' of those in other parts of Africa:

We are such a lot of queer people in the southern part of Africa. We have felt all forms of suppression and are subdued. We lack the vitality, the push, the devil-may-care temperament of the people of the north of Africa (56 TTP).

She indicates here her understanding of the factors surrounding racial identity, and she was also aware that to identify oneself with a country and to establish roots and a home are a strong part of a 'living life'. In *The Cardinals* she suggests that Africa might still be the place where this might be achieved in spite of her experiences there. As Johnny says to Mouse in *The Cardinals*:

...don't you realize what a continent you're living in and at what a time? A new way of life is emerging in Africa and you and I, and many others, fit in somewhere. Africa may not need us but we need a country like Africa. It's just a part of this joke called Life. We need a country the way we need food and clothes. A human life is limited so it has to identify itself with a small corner of this earth. Only then is it able to shape its destiny and present its contribution. This need of a country is basic and instinctive in every living being (71 C).

Bessie Head may have believed that it would be possible for her to fulfil this need by moving to another part of Southern Africa. She replied to an advertisement for primary school teachers required by the Bamangwato Tribal Administration in what was then known as the British Protectorate of Bechuanaland, a country that had avoided the fate of South Africa and was moving towards independence. She was offered a post there, but refused a passport by the South African government, perhaps because, despite her abhorrence of conventional politics, she had joined the Pan African Congress which had initiated the 1960 pass campaign to which the government responded with the Sharpeville massacre. Certainly others in the group of friends to which she belonged had been harassed by the Security Police and many of them also left South Africa around this time (Vigne 1991, 3). I will examine why conventional political action was not a route Bessie Head chose to use as a 'living life' in my last chapter.

When Bessie Head moved to Botswana in 1964 she appeared to show no regret at leaving South Africa, since, as she said, '...I am not a participant in the South African Society' (19.11.1972 KMM BHP). Two years after her arrival there she wrote a letter which appeared to indicate that Botswana had already fulfilled her hopes of establishing a 'living life' elsewhere in Africa:

...this impoverished, drought-stricken country of Botswana is the key to the whole destiny of Southern Africa. I feel this; at least from the way it shaped my own life and made me feel a whole person inside (Undated letter October 1966 KMM BHP).

In this letter she describes a sense of unity of self, as if she had sloughed off an outer self of the 'living death' and, in a new country,

with its own new beginnings, had created a new, whole identity, that of the 'living life'. In *A Question of Power* she describes how, initially, at least, Elizabeth feels she has found her place in the village of

Motabeng:

It was so totally new, so inconceivable, the extreme opposite of 'Hey, Kaffir, get out of the way', the sort of greeting one usually was given in South Africa. Surely there was a flow of feeling here from people to people? (21 QP).

While this initial 'flow of feeling' did not last, this does not mean that it was not genuine during the time Bessie Head experienced it. Rather, it is illustrative of what Robert Jay Lifton calls the 'protean' self (1993) which adapts and takes on whatever forms a particular life situation demands. It foundered when Bessie Head's experiences of a reality as complex as that which she had left behind in South Africa, became cruelly apparent, and the isolation that had a familiar resonance, and which she attributed it to destiny, to inevitability, returned:

A Motswana man approached me and said: 'You are like someone who is looking in on a birthday party to which you will never be invited'. He meant their things and their country are for themselves and they hate outsiders and foreigners. I have lived that destiny (10.3. 1981 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head's personal letters, then, indicate that the friendliness of the villagers eventually exacerbated her sense of isolation. In *A Question of Power*, for example, it is Elizabeth's experience in Motabeng that 'nearly everyone had about six hundred relatives...[and] relatives who marry relatives' (20 QP) whilst 'as far as Batswana society was concerned, she was an out-and-out outsider and would never be *in on their things*' (26 QP). In *When Rain Clouds Gather* Dinorego points out that Botswana 'appeals to few people...There is too much loneliness' (27

RC). In practical ways, too, the country was very different to that which Bessie Head had been used to. There was no electricity during her early years there and she said 'I never saw such dark in South Africa and the Botswana dark used to really scare me' (22-3.2.1975 KMM BHP). Even the very terrain was alien to her:

Botswana is a very bare and bleak place when you first look at it, in South Africa I had only lived in towns and it frightened me at first...the look of the place, only dry earth in drought years (21.7.1974 KMM BHP).

In other ways there were similarities with the country she had left behind. She felt that even the 'new towns like Gaborone' looked 'very much like the slums of South Africa with special reserved areas for the highly paid -- they live in birthday party houses painted pink and blue' (26.6.1974 KMM BHP).

In Botswana, another identity was imposed upon Bessie Head, that of her unstable status as a refugee in a country moving towards independence and experiencing its own internal changes, and where, moreover, refugees did not appear to be welcomed. She saw herself as beset by the authorities who, she felt, 'made no bones about the fact they don't want me here...They're all engaged from the Republic of S. Africa. They've never stopped at showing me what they think of me' (quoted in Vigne 1991, 9). She believed that she lived under the threat of deportation since 'The new Botswana government was deporting refugees then back to South Africa at the rate of one a month until threatened by U.N. (sic)' (20.6.1980 KMM BHP). She found it difficult to 'live and work under the constant threat of deportation -- that it had to come one day. that I won't be granted citizenship but eventually deported.

Alternatively I might suddenly die' (1.9.1973 KMM BHP). The power of the Botswana government to deny citizenship and deport people at will was to haunt Bessie Head for many years. She said:

I had refugee status here for 15 years. After thirteen years I was exhausted by having to report to the police every Monday...It is terrifying to travel on the UN refugee travel document. You can be imprisoned (17.9.1982 KMM BHP).

The issue of imprisonment is one which is central to Bessie Head's sense of identity as a 'living death'. The form of imprisonment she experienced as a refugee meant that she was unable to feel settled in Botswana sufficiently to identify herself with either the country or its people. She said of refugees that 'Perhaps most of us are lost people' (October 1966 KMM BHP), and pointed out that 'Exile means one never had a home' (27.12.76 KMM BHP). This says as much about her own definition of a home as it does of exile, since it implies that one would never have to leave one's 'real' home. She refers to the possibility of literal imprisonment here, and indeed because her circumstances limited her freedom and her choices, she was effectively imprisoned in Botswana 'A lot of us got stuck in Botswana partly because we came over with children, partly because we were very poor' (27.12.1976 KMM BHP). She was also imprisoned in her personal, social and historical positioning in South Africa, from which she found it difficult, if not impossible, to escape. It is apparent, for example, in *When Rain Clouds Gather* that while Makhaya escapes from a literal prison, within the wider prison of South Africa, the Botswana which initially represents the 'illusion of freedom' (7 RC) is soon recognised as yet another prison, albeit a beautiful one (122 RC).



Like his creator, Makhaya remains captive despite his physical escape to a new land, and in Serowe, Bessie Head also continued to feel the imprisoning constraints of the society around her:

This is an environment to beat all environments. There is more suppression, fear, and orderliness in the makeshift of life in this little village than anywhere else in the world. They cluster together and make their faces a mask of sameness, so that none may defy these inane, complacent rules (151 C).

Bessie Head's sense of imprisonment informs much of the imagery she uses to describe a reality lived out within the constraints created by others. An individual's favourite metaphors and symbols are reflective of what his or her identity is all about (McAdams, 1993) and in this context imprisonment was an intrinsic part of her life, and a unifying preoccupation throughout her work, linking all aspects of the 'living death' whose prisoner she was. Prison imagery is also present in the 'iron and steel doors' of Moleka's kingdom (67 M) while for Johnny in *The Cardinals* the 'new townships are just another hell from hell, PK. They're organized prison camps' (28 C). When Johnny and PK cover a riot in a small town outside Cape Town, PK points out that he 'recently saw a film of a German concentration camp. Somehow this strangely resembles it' (80 C). So strong was the sense of imprisonment Bessie Head experienced that it is also evident in her descriptions of a Botswana where even nature is jailer: 'those black storm clouds clung in thick folds of brooding darkness along the low horizon...They were not promising rain. They were prisoners pushed back, in trapped coils of boiling cloud' (5 M). Bessie Head's relation with her world, whether that of her immediate milieu, of Southern Africa as a whole, or of her personal past or her future, was to remain one in which she felt that

she was cut off from life by an imprisonment which often amounted to a sense of solitary confinement:

Not of my own will am I cut off from life. I would plunge in the stream hands, feet, body and soul. But here I move, on the outer edge, in petrified loneliness, and cannot even begin to comprehend the design and pattern of my isolation; cannot break it down, this invisible steel barrier (143 C).

Bessie Head also remained imprisoned within racial categories in Botswana, and this prevented her from forging any new sense of racial identity in this ostensibly very different part of Africa:

Botswana is a tribal, tribal land if you care to touch that side of it. Strange, I have seen white people only look at white people and talk to their own as though their own were unique to them. Here I have seen black people do the same. Their own is unique to them. I can count black people who have walked into my home. Two women and one man. One woman I worked with on the garden project and she is the Kenosi of *A Question of Power*. The other woman was the principal of a secondary school whose life story is on page 83 of *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*. The man is my neighbour Martin Morolong...I have lived here for 18 years and those are the only three black people known to me (17.9.1982 KMM BHP).

She found that racism in Botswana extended beyond simple black and white polarities. Some of the European farm workers there victimised the Khoisan or 'Bushmen', the 'Masarwa' of Bessie Head's second published novel *Maru*, but so did the Batswana. Like Bessie Head, Margaret Cadmore is defined in terms of her race and has developed in isolation. She is also described as a 'Masarwa... a term of contempt which means, obliquely, a low, filthy nation' (12 M) and which was, she said the 'equivalent of "nigger"' (12). Journeying to the remote inland village of Dilepe to take up the position of teacher, Margaret Cadmore finds that a rigid racial divide exists between innumerable 'Masarwa' who are kept as slaves by 'some of the most powerful and wealthy chiefs in the country' (24). They are also oppressed by the villagers themselves. The

term 'Masarwa' has been used, apparently without irony, in recent criticism of Bessie Head's work, despite her clear explanation of its derogatory nature. Modupe O. Olaogun in an article entitled 'Irony and Schizophrenia in Bessie Head's *Maru*' (1994) describes Margaret Cadmore throughout as a 'Masarwa' without either explaining or questioning the term, and Alain Severac (1991) talks about 'Anti-Masarwa racialism' (58) while using a term which Bessie Head describes as in itself racist. Dikeledi, in *Maru*, attempts to assert the importance of human being over classification saying 'with a sudden shrill edge in her voice' that 'There's no such thing as Masarwa... There are only people' (65 M). It is clear that Bessie Head identified at least in part with this oppressed group of people, saying

There were so many similarities between myself and a Bushman tribe here that is ill-treated. I am part-African, part the product of a white woman. It gives one a sort of yellowish complexion. The Bushmen actually look Chinese in every way with thick African hair and this sort of yellowish complexion. Therefore I have often been addressed as a Bushman because of this yellow colour but the tribe itself is terribly despised here and such an oddity that they are a tourist attraction (24.3.1972 KMM BHP).

That Bessie Head was able to use her identification with this oppressed group positively as a source of 'living life' is made clear in one of her personal letters. She said that Margaret Cadmore accepted her racial categorisation defiantly: 'I'm a Masarwa. I am not ashamed of being a Masarwa' (3.9.82 KMM 71 BHP), asserting a sense of racial identity in the way that, for example, the adherents of Negritude and the American Black Power movement had done.

Bessie Head's awareness of her own fundamental and continuing exclusion, and her sense of isolation and alienation as a person neither

black nor white, did not lessen in Botswana. She said 'You know, we go through a wail of a time saying we don't like the white man but God, God, God, I hate the black man much more' (24.2.1974 KMM BHP). She conveys this through Elizabeth's awareness, in *A Question of Power*, that she is not genuinely African but is dependent upon Sello to give her 'real African insight' (159 QP). She also expresses this powerfully in the words of Medusa 'We don't want you here. This is my land. These are my people. We keep our things to ourselves. You keep no secrets. I can do more for the poor than you ever could do' (38 QP). That Bessie Head's feeling of exclusion from life in Botswana was also exacerbated by her not sharing in its language, is made clear once again by Medusa in *A Question of Power*, 'Africa is troubled waters, you know. I'm a powerful swimmer in troubled waters. You'll only drown here. You're not linked up to the people. You don't know any African languages' (44 QP). This emphasizes how important a common language can be in establishing a sense of identification with a country. Bessie Head's first language was English, and although she had learnt some Afrikaans whilst in South Africa, she never learned Setswana, saying 'I am afraid I struggle eternally with a Setswana dictionary and phrase book and after eleven years I've not succeeded in speaking Setswana' (14.8.1976 KMM BHP).

Although some critics have interpreted Bessie Head's words towards the close of *A Question of Power* as an indication that she put down roots there, she herself remained clear that

but the home I referred to towards the end of the book "as she fell asleep she placed on (sic) soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging..." was rather a soul home than a real one...it was only tentatively proposed that Africa might be my soul

home. It may never provide a real home for me but certain qualities in the life of Africa may be an ultimate kind of truth. One would examine that kind of truth with detachment but one would accept reality as it really is. I did not mean a real home (27.12.1976 KMM BHP).

Perhaps Bessie Head's most satisfactory form of identity was her self-identification as a 'New African', which she explained meant 'not a tribal person but one with an intellectual identification' (11.8.1982 KMM BHP). This came about through her brief acquaintance with Robert Sobukwe, the leader of the Pan African Congress who became important to her sense of self in that she felt he 'made me feel African in the broadest sense' because he had 'a sort of identification with a whole continent' (11.8.1982 KMM BHP). In clearly identifying herself intellectually with this category, she was able to describe herself in terms other than those imposed upon her. Equally important was her recognition that, by using the intellectual tools available to her, she was able to negotiate another way of being by maintaining a broad, open political view, as free as possible from external constraints. This was not, however, a straightforward process, nor one that was ever necessarily completed, but it meant that she was able to identify with the optimism and hope for a new future for Africa and Africans and engage with a sense of meaning and purpose. Her characters, like their creator, also live a 'living life' in which their identity is inextricable from meaning and purpose. Mma-Millipede, for example, is involved in a search for faith, by which she means 'an understanding of life' and without which she 'cannot live' (128 RC), while Makhaya's 'inner life had been a battleground of strife and conflict that made him attach such importance to its meaning' (124 RC). Certainly during Bessie Head's early years in Botswana, when international aid and volunteers

were coming into the country, and when Patrick van Rensburg's Brigades and the Boiteko 'self-help' movement were flourishing, there was a great sense of hope for the future of Botswana. This enabled Bessie Head to locate herself within an ideological setting where her sense of identity was bound up with a moral standpoint involving the future good of Africa. As Taylor argues, establishing a moral stance enables an individual to judge the quality of their lives and define their sense of themselves: 'One way of knowing who I am is to know where I stand' (1989, 27). Thus Bessie Head was able to achieve sufficient sense of purpose in Botswana such that, despite later opportunities to leave the country, and her stated desire to do so, she chose to remain. She said 'I am not leaving Botswana...all the time when I said I would leave I kept on feeling very uneasy as though it were not the right thing to do' (5.7.1974 KMM BHP). She decided to stay, she said, 'not because I can end my suffering, but because staying here seemed the only anchor I'd have in my life' (31.8.1974 KMM BHP). She herself created this anchor by engaging in the integrative processes, choices and decisions that comprised her 'living life', although she simultaneously chose not to pursue any illusory sense of belonging.

Identity is a collective term which covers and incorporates all aspects of our being, and is inseparable from the society and the times in which we live. While the sense of identity given to Bessie Head by the dominant group was inseparable from the information she had about the history of her country, the continent she lived in, her immediate environment, and the particular, personal circumstances of her birth, she struggled against the messages that decreed that she should not

exist. However, her continued existence in the face of these messages would only be tolerated if she remained imprisoned in, and was thus controlled by, categories imposed upon her by others. By articulating her experiences in this context, Bessie Head chose not to attempt to deny her experience in any way, but rather to gain a measure of freedom by telling the story of the attempted obliteration of her being, her sense of worthlessness, of belonging nowhere, and of isolation. She did this in part by constantly questioning how it was possible to 'ever sort out one thing from another with people, especially when you are a no-people?' (63 M). Her identity was to remain paradoxical. As a woman in patriarchal society she was invisible; as a woman of colour she was also highly visible. In Laing's terms, she was denied both freedom and subjectivity, and in Foucault's later adaptation and closer analysis of domination, subjection and exploitation she was an 'object of information, never a subject in communication' (Foucault 1977, 200). Because of this, and because of her own preoccupation with her sense of self, and her own frequent descriptions of herself as not existing, it is tempting to assume that her life and work involved a search for identity. Yet such an interpretation would involve perhaps one of the most problematic issues surrounding concepts of identity, that of the value judgements they carry. For example in Erikson's scheme not to achieve an ego identity represents both a psychological and a moral deficit. In applying this to Bessie Head, the negating and labelling process merely continues. To suggest that she lacked a sense of identity, or needed to seek one is to deny her the identity she already had. As McAdams points out

To say that a person 'lacks' identity, then, is not to suggest that (1) the person has no I (as in the case of severe autism), (2) the

person has no me (as for a person who is unable to offer much self-description), or (3) the person has no self (which could refer to either I or me). Instead, it is to say that a person's selfing process is currently experiencing difficulty in integrating self-conceptions into a pattern that suggests life unity and purpose (McAdams 1997, 61).

Bessie Head undoubtedly experienced difficulties with this selfing process many times in her life and the shifts and changes, unity and fragmentation she experienced is embedded within the narratives of her novels. Yet she was nevertheless the agent who was able to describe herself thus, and through this act, to confirm an identity other than that imposed upon her. Placed by others between existence and extinction, she chose to put her own interpretation upon her position by locating herself on a horizon, from whence she was able to gain a considerable amount of manoeuvrability. She accepted her ambivalence to the Africa that had created her, and that had simultaneously given her a 'living life' and imposed its 'living death' upon her, and allowed it to be what it was:

Each one wants a part of you, so be what you are: Africa - the silent, cruel and fickle lover with two sides, and two faces: bland and smiling, and twisting and deceiving, giving all and yet giving nothing (141 C).

The very nature of Bessie Head's experience amid the mass of legislation introduced to 'define' and hence control the majority of the population of South Africa, and that undoubtedly defined and controlled her, simultaneously resulted in her avoiding definition and control, since she did not fit clearly into any fixed category. It has been said that 'multiple differences of being of mixed race define one as outside all available systems of naming' (Smith & Watson 1992, 9). Whilst this may be painful, it may also allow an individual an element of freedom to



create their own systems. She said:

I'm so free, I'm so free...I have a specific kind of background, partly educated by missionaries, and I lack - I lack an identification with an environment. Simply because I had no parents to say, you know 'You ought to think like this' or 'you ought to think like that'. I reared myself...custom and tradition do not hem me in. Nothing hems me in...I would have found an identification with special environment (sic) too small.. Like in South Africa they put you into slots. They would say in South Africa 'Coloured'. And I would find the box too small for me. So I tended to be born outside any box (Patricia Sandler. Unpublished dissertation 1983, 17-18 KMM BHP).

Her phrase 'tended to be born' indicates that the process of birth was, for Bessie Head, a continuous process which freed her from the stasis of deathly categorization. Bessie Head emphasizes this in Elizabeth's 'extreme individualism' in *A Question of Power* which she said 'makes her live outside all possible social contexts' (19.9.1982 KMM BHP). Even her own and her characters' isolation allowed her periods of freedom since, as she said 'I'd suffocate to death in an environment so I always stand on a high hill and look down into the valley' (19.9.1982 KMM BHP).

It is my contention, then, that Bessie Head did not lack a sense of identity since she had been given an identity at birth. Thus, she had no need to seek an identity through her work. While Severac's belief in a permanent shedding of self (1991) implies the pursuit of a better self, it also indicates the loss of everything that makes up the self, including the past and memory, which were of great value to Bessie Head, and an important part of her identity. Patrick Colm Hogan, in speaking of the instability and psychotic disaster (1994) of Bessie Head's identity allows her no other dimension. Yet Bessie Head was able to establish herself as more than this by engaging in and articulating her continual struggle between the apparent polarities of 'living life' and

'living death' which were expressive of the paradox of her existence. Because the 'living life' of her physical existence was intensely goal-directed in the form of her will to survive, she was able to exert some control over her own existence, and to achieve a measure of freedom. These were survival strategies which were facilitated by a lifelong learning process which Bessie Head described thus: 'my soul is like a jig-saw puzzle; one more piece is being put into place but my teachers this time have not been Jesus and Buddha but the ordinary man and woman in Africa' (22.1.1972 KMM BHP). She indicates here her appreciation of how much of what we are is learned from others, and makes clear her own willingness to learn. As Jane Miller points out, learning the self and learning the parameters of a life are never achieved once and for all, nor are they ever simply a matter of assimilating to one set of models whilst rejecting another. She goes on:

Growing up within the materially overwhelming oppression and poverty of certain communities which have been corroded by colonialism undoubtedly exacerbates the confusions of this learning, for it will take place within stark contrasts and contradictions between positive and negative values, and also amidst infinitely more uncertain, protean and dangerous constraints and possibilities (1990, 127).

Bessie Head's life and her work are full of examples of such stark contrasts and contradictions, constraints and possibilities, and her characters and their environments are expressive of her own dilemmas. They characters embody both the 'living life' and the 'living death' of their creator's existence, as she struggles to maintain the former whilst never entirely defeating the latter. Bessie Head's writing itself, which provides a structure, shape and meaning to her experiences, and is an investigation into how she might live and make

sense of her life, is bound up with her sense of identity. This process which is perhaps expressed most clearly in Bessie Head's description of Margaret Cadmore, a woman whose 'breaking point could so clearly be seen - as though one part of her broke down and was mended by another, and so on' (71 M). The unification, the mending of the broken or fragmented parts of herself were thus achieved periodically through her writing, in the dialectic between acceptance of the identity imposed upon her by more powerful others, and her explorations into the possibilities of the meaning and purpose of a 'living life'. Because she was both participant and observer of her own life, she did not occupy a static position or viewpoint but a shifting and multidimensional one, as is evident in the contradictions that characterize her work. Although Bessie Head was, in her writing, as in her life, what others told her she was, she was also what she chose to be, since, as Laing says:

The act I do is me, and I become 'me' only in and through action. Also, there is a sense in which a person "keeps himself alive" by his acts; each act can be a new beginning, a new birth, a recreation of oneself, a self-fulfilling (1961, 118).

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MATERNAL REPRESENTATION IN THE WORK OF BESSIE HEAD

*My only slight identity is the woman who gave birth to me* (25.6.1985 KMM BHP)

Judith Kegan Gardiner suggests that 'Contemporary writers concur that hostility between mothers and daughters is inevitable under patriarchy and that the formation of a separate identity for the daughter involves a difficult "rebirthing"' (1978, 146). A close identification between mother and child is of course an inevitable part of the mother-child dyad, in which each depends on the other since without the other, neither would exist. Kegan Gardiner makes clear just how strongly the identities of daughters are bound up with their mothers, as well as the link between identity and autobiography, saying

With the resurgence of women's fiction in the twentieth century, many autobiographical or confessional novels by women trace the coming to adulthood, that is, to individual identity, of a daughter who must define herself in terms of her mother. In the Oedipus myth, the son murders his father in order to replace him. Contrastingly, in the new woman's myth, the daughter 'kills' her mother in order *not* to have to take her place (1978, 146).

While in African society many women act as mothers, including sisters, aunts and grandmothers, this was not a society of which Bessie Head was a part. Her cry 'children ought to have as much [sic] mothers as possible' (28.7.1983 KMM BHP) was therefore not borne of her own experience. Nevertheless, a central focus in her work was the mother that she never knew, but with whom she closely identified throughout her life, and whom she felt was the source of the 'only slight identity' (25.6.1985 KMM BHP) she had. All other traces had been obliterated, she

believed, by both social and familial forces. In this chapter I want to examine works which reveal how Bessie Head's link with the woman who gave her a 'living life' but also condemned her to a 'living death' was both precious and strong, but also strongly ambivalent. Bessie Head relates the nature of this relationship through the life-giving and life-destroying characteristics of certain key figures who represent the absent mother, and how they affect her child characters and those who play childlike and dependent roles in her work. All of these characters were fashioned from Bessie Head's most fundamental and problematic relationship, in whose representations the writer's dual sense of 'living life' and 'living death' are held in tension.

Kegan Gardiner suggests two metaphors for female experience which have relevance for women's writing, and which are particularly pertinent to Bessie Head's work. One is that 'female identity is a process' (Kegan Gardiner 1982, 179) in which she suggests that we can approach a text with the hypothesis that the female author is engaged in testing and defining various aspects of identity from many imaginative possibilities. She further suggests that women writers use their texts, particularly those centering upon a female hero, as a part of the continuing process of involving her own self-definition with her characters. The author exercises magical control over her character, creating her from representations of herself and her ideas. Thus the text and its female hero begin as narcissistic extensions of the author. Kegan Gardiner's second metaphor is that 'the hero is her author's daughter' (1982, 179):

Thus the author may define herself through the text while creating her female hero. This can be a positive, therapeutic relationship,

like learning to be a mother, that is, learning to experience oneself as one's own cared-for child and as one's own caring mother while simultaneously learning to experience one's creation as other, as separate from the self (187).

Bessie Head extends Kegan Gardiner's metaphors by using key characters, both male and female, not only as representations of herself in order to test and define possible avenues of self-development, but also to define her relationship with her mother and with her world. She also used maternal representations throughout her work in order to express her ambivalence to this 'unknown, lovely, and unpredictable woman' (Dovey 1989, 33) who was, for Bessie Head, much more than one of the 'invisible presences' (quoted in Quinby 1992, 301) Virginia Woolf referred to with regard to her own dead mother, and who plays so important a part in every life. Instead, Bessie Amelia Emery was to remain a highly visible and important presence throughout her daughter's life and work. Because Bessie Head had 'scant detail on her life and [did] not know her at all' she built up a sense of her biological mother 'put together from what the foster mother told me and what the missionaries were prepared to tell me' (13.8.78 KMM BHP). She therefore had sufficient information about her mother to construct a frame of reference to support the sense of 'living life' which was essential to her continued survival. The gaps in this information ostensibly allowed her the latitude to choose a preferred version of her mother as a heroic and idealized figure, incarcerated in a mental hospital because of her relationship with a black man and the subsequent birth of her 'mixed race' child and thus a martyr to racism. It is to this idealized version of her mother and its importance to Bessie Head's sense of 'slight identity' that I want to turn first.

It was money from her mother's estate that supported Bessie Head when she was cared for by the Pietermaritzburg Child Welfare Society. She also wrote 'There is a letter she wrote in the mental hospital: "Please set aside some of my money for my child's education"' (25.6.85 KMM BHP). Therefore the writer felt that her mother had loved her and had laid the foundations for her future career as a writer. She pointed out that 'I have done much with her stipulation. I had the base of a small high school education and on that base I continued to educate myself. Today I am a writer of international repute' (25.6.1985 KMM BHP). From this perspective Bessie Head's mother had a powerful influence on her child, and loved her enough to care about her future and to make provision for her. Kenneth Birch confirms Bessie Amelia Emery's feeling for her children in his monograph *The White Antecedents of Bessie Head* where he says that 'Toby' lived on at Fort Napier 'pining for her legitimate son (in the army) and her illegitimate daughter who was growing up only two kilometres away' (1995, 11). Although she knew little about her mother, Bessie Head spoke of her as a spirited and rebellious woman whom she admired. In her letters it was this aspect of her mother she chose to represent: a bold, courageous and unconventional woman. In doing so, she chose by extension a similar personality for herself, saying 'I am certain that I am the exact replica in temperament of my mother' (10.6. 1975 KMM BHP). She said 'Knowing myself and my wild, bold courage, that woman, my mother, must have raised hell. She was no mealy mouthed hypocrite of a white' (13.8.1978 KMM BHP). She appears to have chosen a realistic estimation of her mother's character, since Kenneth Birch describes her thus:

The high-spirited Toby, a favourite of her father, as she grew up did not wish to be domesticated, and, as a result, at a time when

few girls worked in offices, her father obtained employment for her with his solicitors...She was, in other words, rebellious (1995, 7).

'Toby', then, departed from the female convention of the time in her desire to work outside the home, and, moreover, shortly after coming of age, she married secretly by special license.

Bessie Head's sense of identification with her mother went deeper than her association with her as a rebel, however. She said:

Knowing my own temperament, my mother and I are the sorts of people who get ourselves into positions like that where people persecute us for weird reasons. The two of us are an astonishing combination...' (13.8.1978 KMM BHP).

Here Bessie Head speaks of her mother in the present tense and links her closely to her own life, showing her continual identification with her. She also holds both she and her mother personally responsible for their own plight and their persecution by others, when in reality they were both part of a much greater web of circumstances. On another occasion Bessie Head positioned her mother at her back, almost urging her on, saying 'I have one of the greatest women in the world behind my back -- my mother. I'd hear her soul and her heroism but little else' (17.9.1969 KMM BHP). This clearly indicates that her admiration for her mother often reached the point of worship. Indeed, in an undated letter she elevated her mother to the stature of a goddess, again linking her closely with herself: 'the name Bessie belonged to my mother whom I never knew. I heard things about her which raised her to the stature of a goddess and I can't let such great history down' (undated letter KMM BHP). By seeing her mother as a goddess, with the attendant religious overtones of purity, unselfish devotion, immortality but also of power,



Bessie Head ensured that her mother remained far above any simply human dimension. In connecting herself closely with her mother as well as setting herself high standards in order not to let her mother down, she also raised her own status significantly above that given to her at birth by others.

Bessie Head's internalized mother was as sharply real to her as if she existed in the flesh, but she was not simply the idealized mother the writer chose to portray in her personal letters. Because Bessie Head's early experiences could hardly have failed to have an impact upon her later life, any attempt to recreate herself in her texts as the cared for child nurtured into a 'living life' by her idealized mother was fraught with difficulty, and her relationship with her absent mother was inevitably filled with conflict. In her novel *A Question of Power* Bessie Head describes Elizabeth's early experiences in having spent her first months being passed back and forth between prospective foster parents (17). Bessie Head's own experience parallels this in that she 'did not look proper' (25.6.1985 KMM BHP) in relation to her classification as white at birth and was thus rejected by her first foster parents. This is confirmed by Kenneth Birch, who says that she was 'pronounced coloured' by her first foster parents who then 'rejected' her (1995, 11). She was then fostered elsewhere, and writes that 'The foster mother, who was coloured, received me about two months after I'd been born. My head was covered in sores from neglect and I'd not been properly fed' (13.8.1978 KMM BHP). The impact of such early deprivation operates on levels other than the physical. The first five years of life are generally seen as the most sensitive by psychologists

in regard to the development of attachment to available figures. Bowlby, for example, postulates that the varied expectations of the accessibility and responsiveness of attachment figures that different individuals develop during the years of immaturity are tolerably accurate reflections of the experiences those individuals have actually had. According to Bowlby 'Whatever expectations are developed during those years tend to persist relatively unchanged throughout the rest of life' (1973, 202). In this context it is likely that Bessie Head's experiences in her unsettled early months led to serious consequences for her later life. Alice Miller says that:

Every child has a legitimate narcissistic need to be noticed, understood, taken seriously, and respected by his mother. In the first weeks and months of life he needs to have the mother at his disposal, must be able to use her and to be mirrored by her...provided that the mother is really looking at the unique, small, helpless being and not projecting her own introjects on to the child, nor her own expectations, fears and plans for the child. In that case, the child would not find himself in his mother's face but rather the mother's own predicaments. This child would remain without a mirror, and for the rest of his life would be seeking this mirror in vain (1991, 49).

For Bessie Head, any early mirrors would have been either absent, or would have confirmed and reflected all the complexities that her mother's situation and her own racially mixed inheritance in a racist climate involved. It is also probable that Bessie Head missed some of the most important experiences a child can have, as for example

In his [sic] first partnership outside the womb, the infant is filled up with the bliss of unconditional love - the bliss of oneness with his mother. All later love and dialogue is a striving to reconcile our longings to restore the lost bliss of oneness with our equally intense need for separateness and individual self-hood (Louise Kaplan quoted in Kendra Smith 1987, 220-1).

Kendra Smith points out 'that "failure to thrive" - even death' have been found to be 'consequences for institutionalized infants who missed out' on this stage (1987, 222). Bessie Head was deprived, during her early life, of many positive nurturing experiences, and it is evident throughout her writing that she yearned for oneness with another. For example, she said 'I wanted to be born together with someone else, so that two could face life together better than one' (22.4.1976 KMM BHP). In her portrayal of the relationship between Margaret Cadmore and her adopted daughter, she indicates her hunger for a fusion of mother and child, describing Margaret's mind and heart as 'composed of a little bit of everything she had absorbed from Margaret Cadmore' (16 M).

It is evident from recent work on women's identity that the meaning of merging and engulfment has particular significance for them, and reveals elements from early stages of their development (Jelinek 1980). A woman's self is defined throughout her life 'through social relationships; issues of fusion and merger of the self with others are significant, [while] ego and body boundaries remain flexible' (Kegan Gardiner 1982, 182). Female personality, according to the feminist psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow, (1989) is relational and more fluidly defined than that of males since, she argues, they have different developmental experiences. The most fundamental of these is that a girl forms her gender identity positively, in becoming like the mother with whom she begins life as a symbiotic merger, rather than negatively, like a boy who must differentiate himself from the mother, his first caretaker. According to Cixous and Kristeva merging and fluidity as

characteristic of women's experience is frequently depicted through water imagery:

as for countless mythologies, water is the feminine element *par excellence*... [it] reflects the comforting security of the mother's womb. It is within this space that Cixous's speaking subject is free to move from one subject position to another, or to merge oceanically with the world (Moi, 1988, 117).

The recurring sense of both longing and fearing to merge with others is a recurring characteristic of Bessie Head's work, and images of water, whether oceans, rivers, or streams appear throughout her writing. For example, Keaja and Tselana meet during torrential rain in 'The Lovers' (84 TTP), but perhaps the short story which is particularly illustrative of the diversity of material into which Bessie Head was able to interpolate aspects of her own experience is 'The Deep River: A Story of Tribal Migration'. This appears in her collection of Botswana village tales *The Collector of Treasures*, and is a story gleaned from Botswana oral history told to her by one of the old men of the village she had interviewed. She related in a letter how the man who gave her the information was nearly 100, and she could only interview him for ten minutes at a time since he had a bad heart and a wheeze, and kept falling ill. The notes she made were hence so confused that she could find no way of including them in her work *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (28.1.1975 KMM BHP), for which they were intended. Instead, she fashioned them into a short story wherein she yoked her own strong feelings about merging and engulfment with a traditional tale which describes how the Monamapee tribe originally have no face other than the face of Monamapee, their chief. They live together like a deep river in an undifferentiated, idyllic existence until circumstances bring about a

move towards individuality and societal divisions. On one level this is the story's main focus. However, the writer's own concerns with the link between her mother and her sense of self may have attracted her to a tale in which the tribe forget their origins as the child forgets its time in the womb. The reasons for the tribe's banishment remain confused, and the only part of their history they retain is the name, Talaote, which means 'all right, you can go'. The tribe's experience represent both aspects of the dual pull towards and away from the mother, and they embody the writer's own yearnings for a secure time of undifferentiation.

The 'deep river', which forms the central motif of this story, is only one of the many instances in Bessie Head's work where water is significant. For example, the relationship between Maru and Moleka begins in a oneness which is described in terms of water:

When had he and Maru not lived in each others arms and shared everything?...But they never knew that no experiences interrupted the river and permanent flow of their deep affection. It was Moleka, so involved in this river, who never had time to notice the strange and unpredictable evolution of his friend (33 M).

In Zulu mythology, water is symbolic of the source of new life (Canonici 1989, 32) but water symbolism is characteristically contradictory in Bessie Head's work. This is particularly evident in the essay 'Earth and Everything' in *The Cardinals*, where she says that 'A thousand differing contradictions pour out to conceal the underground stream that is the same always, flowing, continuous' (139 C). Hidden underground, fluid and in motion, is the 'living life' of freedom and movement: but water also drowns and engulfs, as for example when the young Margaret Cadmore in *Maru* experiences an existential crisis described by the

metaphor of 'a non-swimmer suddenly thrown into deep water' (101 M). Thus, it also represents the 'living death' of the constant fear and threat of impending physical death, indicating how closely the two processes co-exist in Bessie Head's work. In her essay 'Where is the Hour of the Beautiful Dancing of Birds in the Sun-wind?' she writes:

All life flows continuously like water in the stream and I am only some of the water in the stream, never able to gauge my depth. The hours, the years, the eternities slip by too quickly, moving, changing, never the same thing. I move with this current to the ocean only to be flung back again to the stream. The cycle seems unending, repetitive....I chafe and fight against being only some of the water in the stream. I would rather be the winged one above, soaring sky-high and free (150-151 C).

Once again, Bessie Head's familiar preoccupations with freedom and imprisonment are evident here. Water, whilst liberating, also entraps her because she is only *some* of the water. Never free from this process, she longs to be the 'winged one above'.

In her novel *A Question of Power* Bessie Head describes the circumstances which form an important part of her own experience: that the story of Elizabeth's real mother was 'shrouded in secrecy until she was thirteen. She had loved another woman as her mother, who was also part African, part English, like Elizabeth' (15 QP). According to Kegan Gardiner, women can experience an intensity of rage, an almost unbearable anxiety, against each other as mothers and daughters which can be deflected by splitting mothers into the opposing symbols of the 'all-nurturant good mother and the wicked stepmother', found in 'myth, fairy tale, everyday life, and in some psychosis' (1978, 147). Because she had no 'real' mother in that she neither knew nor was brought up by her biological mother, Bessie Head had a ready-made split not only

between the 'good' mother she constructed from the woman who had provided for her and the 'bad' mother who had abandoned her, but also the 'wicked stepmother' in the figure of her foster-mother, Nellie Heathcote. In a letter to the daughter of another of Mrs Heathcote's foster children she wrote:

But Nellie Heathcote was all that your mother and I knew of mother. We were a strange and complicated family who lived with Nellie Heathcote at different periods...Nellie Heathcote reared four children so - the unwanted babies of white women who had love affairs with black men...but when I was 13 the child welfare society removed me from Nellie Heathcote to the mission orphanage in Durban. They said her home conditions were too poor...I was a child who was beaten all the time...of Nellie Heathcote I know I loved her and looked after her as I was able but she did bad things to me. She seemed to think I should be violently beaten for the slightest thing. She would not let me read books. If she found me with a book in my hand she would pull it away. She said people who read books went mad. She was only happy if I was cleaning the house and working (27.12.1983 KMM BHP).

In this description, Mrs Heathcote fits the role of 'wicked stepmother'. It also appears that, as a child, Bessie Head was involved in a reversal of the caring role by looking after her foster mother rather than being cared for herself, and was punished for meeting her own needs. The relationship she had with her foster mother, Mrs Heathcote, did not appear to offer her any strong maternal substitute for the loss of her own mother. In 1950, when she was 13 years old, the death of Nellie Heathcote's husband resulted in the family's circumstances becoming 'very depressed' (25.6.1985 KMM BHP). The Pietermaritzburg Child Welfare Society removed Bessie Head from the family and she was sent to St Monica's Orphanage, Hilary, Durban, an Anglican mission. In *A Question of Power* Bessie Head describes the ambivalence present in the attitude of Elizabeth who, despite her love for her stepmother, is 'secretly relieved' to be removed from her impoverished surroundings and

sent to the mission school. Much of her childhood, after all, had been spent 'sitting under a lamp-post near her house, crying because everyone was drunk and there was no food, no one to think about children' (15-16 QP).

At the mission school Elizabeth is told by the principal of the mission school that she

must be very careful. Your mother was insane. If you're not careful you'll get insane just like your mother. Your mother was a white woman. They had to lock her up, as she was having a child by the stable boy, who was a native (16 QP).

The prophesy that Bessie Head would become 'insane' like her mother was a powerful one, although it did not make sense to her: 'If you look at that statement straight on, it does not make sense at all, does it? A woman is insane because she is white and sleeps with a black man' (19.8.1978 KMM BHP). In *A Question of Power* Elizabeth will later wonder whether the legacy of madness was left to her in order that her mother need not have suffered its stigma alone. In this way she acknowledges through Elizabeth that her mother did not only bestow upon her the gifts of education and her later status as a writer but another, more insidious legacy. Phyllis Chesler writes extensively about women and madness, describing the 'deeply conditioned nature of women's compliance with her literal and psychological self-sacrifice' (1974, 99) which arises

Through the imposition of a servant status on women [that] the female culture has elaborated a whole servile ethic of 'self-sacrifice'. Self-sacrifice as the major ethic of the female culture - has been one of the most effective psychological blocks to women's open rebellion and demand for self-determination. It has also been a major tool of male manipulation of females (199-200).



Chesler maintains that women's fear of economic, physical and sexual deprivation or punishment teaches them to value their own sacrifice so highly that they quite 'naturally' perform it. If their anger about this natural self-sacrifice drives them 'mad', then Chesler goes on to say that 'asylum practices will exact their sacrifice anyway' (99). Her comments that, for those who are or who feel relatively helpless 'anger is a painful and dangerous display' (141) call to mind Kenneth Birch's description of the 'cauldron of rage, frustration and devastation' that gave rise to his sister's 'explosive displays' after the accidental death of her child (1995, 9). That Mrs Emery had seen her child killed in a road accident would have been reason enough to produce an extreme behavioural response. Her condition can also be interpreted as a response to her experiences in a patriarchal society that is at best ambivalent towards women and where, even if they suppress their anger, they can still see themselves as 'sick' or 'bad' and seek mental health care which often reinforces their beliefs. Whatever their emotion, and regardless of its source, the label of 'mental illness' or 'instability' serves to reduce its complexity to a fixed state. Little wonder then that in women's writing these experiences are frequently expressed in a kind of 'living death' in the form of images of madness and confinement. According to Chesler, then, madness is

both an expression of female powerlessness and an unsuccessful attempt to reject and overcome this state. Madness and asylums generally function as mirror-images of the female experience, and as penalties for *being* 'female', as well as for desiring or daring *not* to be. If the dare is enacted deeply or dramatically enough, death (through slow or fast suicide) ensues (1974, 15).

A powerful stigma is still attached to persons who are perceived as experiencing mental health difficulties. In the 1930s, when Mrs Emery was diagnosed, this would certainly have been no less in evidence. Bessie Head felt that she was stigmatized by association: 'I was treated at the mission school as a potentially depraved person, the off-spring of a depraved woman' (13.8.1978 KMM BHP). Her own sense of identity was influenced accordingly since, as R.D. Laing (1961) points out, others tell us who we are. Bessie Head's mother, and later the writer herself, were both hospitalized during a period of acute crisis, and both mother and daughter can be seen to parody the female condition in patriarchal societies, facing incarceration in a mental institution, isolated and dependant, condemned to a 'living death'.

If Bessie Head ever felt any rage or hatred towards her mother because of the circumstances in which she found herself, she never expressed it directly; throughout her personal writing she preserved her mother's name with care and love. However, in the characters who play maternal roles throughout her work she is able to explore, at a fictional remove, her ambivalence to her mother as not only a powerless victim of both the state and her family, but also as the possessor of the ultimate power over life and death, inherent in a mother's ability to give or withhold warmth and nourishment to a helpless child. The mother, like Kali, the ambiguous goddess of the Hindu religion with her girdle of severed hands who fascinated Bessie Head, can give life and she can also destroy it. In a personal letter, Bessie Head wrote:

The destructive cycle is the Kali Yuga...They maintain that the Kali Yuga, the rise of the female principle has always brought death and destruction to the world. It leads into the golden age of mankind but this has never been achieved because women have

always brought about the downfall of the world of men...the world, they say is now in the Kali Yuga again, with the rise to dominance of the female principle. Does this not make sense. Look at the wild shout of the women's liberation movement. They are after something but they don't know what, it takes awful turns and messes in America, wild indiscriminate sex and lesbianism. But that's what they mapped out. To correspond with this cycle of the Kali Yuga they spotted a new and fearful female principle, Mother Kali, they call her (30.12.1978 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head's ambivalence to her own sex is clearly shown here, an ambivalence that is particularly evident in her portrayal of characters who play maternal roles in her work, and their effect upon the lives of her child characters, as well as in the fate of these children. In *The Cardinals* a female child is left by her mother in 'a large slum area of tin shacks, bounded on the one side by a mile-long graveyard and on the other by the city refuse dump' (1 C). The child abandoned in these bleak surroundings is named Miriam, and later nicknamed Mouse.

Initially

The protectiveness and love of the woman Sarah secluded her from much of the crudeness and harshness of the life. Her quiet and solemn reserve protected her further. She was the type of child who preferred to be alone (4 C).

Despite the love and care she received from the woman, it is not long before the child has to learn

the lessons every unwanted stray has to learn: Work hard. Do not answer back no matter what we do to you. Be satisfied with the scraps we give you, you cannot have what our children have. Remember we are unpredictable; when the mood gets us we can throw you out (10 C).

Although the child has the ability to protect herself to a certain extent by standing apart from life, the reader is left in no doubt about the absolute power the adult world holds over her. Another child left motherless and in the care of a less than satisfactory maternal figure is the orphaned 'Masarwa' girl who is adopted by Margaret Cadmore the

missionary, and to whom she gives her name. The missionary is described as an isolated woman, 'whose own heart continually muddled her and who had been a woman who lived without love' but also 'without her equal in soul stature' (94 M). She lacks the rare quality of love of mankind and indeed, she is described as a person who never really liked to be involved with them, although she is depicted by the writer as being a woman of 'common sense' (13 M), which is seen as a commendable substitute. Seeing most people, including her spouse, as 'dull and stupid' (12 M), she pours upon them streams of abuse. She also sees people as 'victims' (13 M) upon who she must take 'revenge' (13 M). Margaret Cadmore, then, is presented as a woman incapable of loving or even liking others, of treating them with contempt as inferiors and reducing them to cartoon-like sketches accompanied by scathing comments. Sometimes, however, her objectification of others takes the form of idealization, as when she sketches the infant Margaret's dead mother, who was found clad in garments stained by childbirth and urine, saying that 'She looks like a Goddess' (15 M).

Margaret Cadmore's objectification of others is an attempt to avoid becoming the object of others herself. Unable to engage in a direct relationship with others, she treats the child she adopts as an object rather than a living human being and has little, if any, feeling for her. Whilst 'absent-mindedly' (14 M) feeding the child, her mind is on other things, and when she speculates about the child's people, she appears to have little genuine interest or knowledge about their plight, and no compassion. While she briefly ponders on where they might be buried and notes that 'They don't seem to be at all a part of the life

of this country' (13 M) she shows no further interest in their history or privations. Yet this is the woman who functions as the role model, primary love object and idealized maternal figure for the young orphan, the one who helps her 'gain control over the only part of life that would be hers, her mind and soul' (16 M). Consequently the young Margaret Cadmore is unable to experience any feeling of closeness towards her adoptive mother although she also experiences a terrifying lack of separation from the older woman until the latter abruptly leaves Botswana. When she leaves, the writer says that 'She had been humour, laughter, fun, unpredictable-ness, a whole life of vibrating happiness' (20 M), although the text clearly indicates that the lessons the girl has learned from her mentor and namesake have been learned in 'social isolation and lack of communication with others' (19 M). More terrifyingly, there had been:

a big hole in the child's mind between the time that she slowly became conscious of her life in the home of the missionaries and conscious of herself as a person. A big hole was there because, unlike other children, she was never able to say: "I am this or that. My parents are this or that" There was no one in later life who did not hesitate to tell her that she was a Bushman, mixed breed, half-breed, low breed or bastard (15-16M).

While there are valid gendered and racial reasons why the young Margaret Cadmore is depicted as experiencing the sense of non-existence implicit in the description of the 'big hole' in her mind (15 M), Bessie Head's own sense of being without a mother also infuses the girl's reality. Her close identification with a woman whose existence she perceived as having been 'obliterated' is strongly evident in Margaret Cadmore's relationship with a woman shown as emotionally absent and dreads 'drains on her emotional resources' (18 M). It is also evident

in the character of a girl who is as unable to connect herself literally to any familial continuum as her creator, and who is acutely aware that she lives on the 'edge of something' (16 M), something that is existence itself. Bessie Head's sense of abandonment is apparent in the short story *The Collector of Treasures*, although the apparent focus of this story lies in the murder of Garasego by Dikeledi Mokopi. Dikeledi, whose name means 'mother's tears', is sentenced to life imprisonment on a charge of the manslaughter of her husband after cutting off 'his special parts with a knife' (89 CT). Dikeledi is a very skilled woman who could 'knit, sew, and weave baskets': 'Whenever my friends wanted to thatch their huts, I was there...I was always busy and employed because it was with these hands that I fed and reared my children' (90 CT). Although she is capable of fending for herself, of working and taking care of her children, she approaches Garesego, the husband who deserted her and who is both a womaniser and a vicious drunk, for money for her son's education. In choosing to ask Garasego, rather than her neighbour and husband of her close friend, Paul Thebolo, a man so sharply contrasted with Garasego that he is 'a poem of tenderness' (93 CT), Dikeledi courts certain disaster. Before long her husband, absent from the home for many years, decides to return. Dikeledi's 'first panic-stricken thought was to gather up the children and flee the village' (101 CT). However, because she has nowhere to go, and realizes the futility of protest, she plays along with him, and then kills him. Dikeledi's actions have been interpreted in a number of ways. Because the intensity of her rage is turned against her husband rather than internalized and turned in upon herself, her act can be interpreted as a rejection of her passive feminine role. It can also, however, be seen

as an act motivated by a conditioned female addiction to masochism. The tragically high price she pays is that of her life in the world and the loss of her children, who lose their mother through her effective abandonment. In this latter context, however, the story foregrounds Bessie Head's unspoken feelings of abandonment and indeed, in consigning Dikeledi to life imprisonment, the writer could be seen to commit textual matricide as a response to her own abandonment.

The destructive potential inherent in the maternal role goes beyond the lack of, or withholding of, nurturance, whether through abandonment or lack of maternal feeling, however. This made clear in the attempted or achieved physical destruction of many of the children in Bessie Head's work. Charlotte Bruner, who points out Bessie Head's 'remarkable and rare ability to portray child characters as full protagonists' in her work rather than as 'miniature adults' (6) notes that the lives of these exceptional, beautiful but believable children (6) are often accompanied by the 'futile tragedy of his destruction' (6-7). She, says that, for example, 'Friedman is Africa today' (1979, 11) and he, along with Aidoo's Kwesi, are children who 'do not live out the promise of Africa's future, but their creators urge us to consider their dilemmas' (11). Bruner asks of the tragedy of these children's short lives: 'Is this Africa's tragedy, too?' (8) and, in speaking in particular of Isaac, Paulina's son in *When Rain Clouds Gather* she answers her own question by suggesting that his loss is 'the poignant loss of promise in Africa today' (9). While Bruner's emphasis is on these children as Africa's children, tragically destroyed, they are also embodiments of the threat of Bessie Head's own destruction, which was the 'living

death' she experienced. This is also evident in 'Jacob, the Story of a Faith-Healing Priest', a story within a story, in which two boys, Jacob and Isaac, are orphaned when their parents are killed in a car accident. The boys are subsequently cared for by an uncle who lives off the children's inheritance, and cares lavishly for his own children, while the two adopted sons go barefoot, are clothed in rags and treated as slaves:

Those who are born to suffer, experience suffering to its abysmal depths. The damage to the two children did not stop at the expropriation of their inheritance. It was now claimed by the uncle and all the relatives that since the children were not pure Batswana by birth, they were therefore an inferior species. They were fed according to their status. They were given plain porridge with salt and water at every meal, day in and day out, year in and year out. Their sleeping quarters were a ramshackle hut at the bottom of their uncle's yard. They slept on pieces of sacking and lived out their whole lives in that dog house (24 CT).

One of the boys, Isaac, worn out by poor diet and hard labour, eventually dies. Bessie Head poignantly describes the feelings of these motherless children, neglected, mistreated, abandoned:

A deep and terrifying loneliness possessed the heart of the small boy who was left behind that night...Any child trapped in this cycle of cruelty can find no way out except to cry lonely, hot tears in the dark night (25 CT).

There are other children in Bessie Head's work who die not through neglect, but who are murdered, for example, in 'Looking for a Rain God' where two little girls, Neo and Boseyong, are sacrificed to the Rain God. In this story 'It was the women of the family who finally broke down under the strain of waiting for rain. It was really the two women who caused the death of the little girls' (59 CT). Sometimes the child's death in Bessie Head's work appears accidental, as in 'The Wind and a Boy' based on the true story of a boy, Friedman, who had lived in



Serowe and was named after a village doctor (31.12.1984 KMM BHP). The boy, who was conceived after 'a casual mating' (70 CT), had been handed over to his mother's mother 'and that was that; she could afford to forget him as he had a real mother now' (70 CT). Bessie Head indicates here that the biological mother is not necessarily a 'real' mother. However, it may be because the child lacks the fundamental protection afforded by the woman we generally associate with the 'real' mother that Friedman is killed:

In the devil-may-care fashion of all the small boys, he cycled right into its path, turned his head and smiled appealingly at the driver. The truck caught him on the front bumper, squashed the bicycle and dragged the boy along at a crazy speed for another hundred yards, dropped him and careered on for another twenty yards before coming to a halt. The boy's pretty face was a smear all along the road and he only had a torso left (74 CT).

The unspoken question in much of Bessie Head's work, then, is whether a 'real' mother would abandon her child to either a 'living death' or physical destruction. For example, Johanna in 'The Story of a Faith Healing Priest', in *The Collector of Treasures*, like Margaret Cadmore senior 'a woman of practical common sense with no whims or fancies' (23), also separates the role of mother from her status as a woman, saying 'I am a real woman' (30) and 'as the saying goes the children of a real woman do not get lean or die' (30) nor can they 'fall into the fire' (31).

The death of Isaac in *When Rain Clouds Gather* also highlights the complexity of Bessie Head's characterization of the relationship between mothers and children. Paulina Sebeso is a mother who has been effectively abandoned because of her husband's suicide. She struggles to survive and bring up her son and daughter in a 'country of fatherless

children' (119 RC), where she wonders 'Why did everyone she ever wanted have to go away?' (117). Charlotte Bruner states that 'Because the herd is Paulina's total capital, Isaac must go into the hills alone with the cattle' (1979, 9). However, Paulina was given an alternative solution by Makhaya, who wants her to sell her cattle to free Isaac from his hard life at the cattle post and allow him to attend school. He calculates that the sale of the cattle would raise nine hundred pounds for Paulina (141-2 RC) which would give her security for four or five years which is, as Makhaya says, 'time enough to look around and find another way of earning a living' (142). He goes on to say 'I'll help you because I'm interested in the same thing' (142). However, Paulina rejects this solution. As a result, Isaac dies alone at the cattle post of malnutrition and tuberculosis. Unlike his biblical namesake, Bessie Head's Isaac appears to have been sacrificed so that Paulina can have Makhaya, since

Mma-Millipede would have said it was one rare occasion when the Lord took away with one hand and gave with another because it was seldom that the Lord ever gave a woman a man like Makhaya (172 RC).

Bessie Head herself was, in a sense, born and abandoned into a 'living death' because of her mother's relationship with a black man in racist South Africa, a 'living death' that might have been transformed into a physical death had her mother not provided her with money for an education which enabled the writer to maintain a 'living life'. Bessie Head's sense of herself as an outsider because of her parentage is also evident in her portrayal of certain of her characters as experiments. Because she believed her mother had died in the Fort Napier Mental Institution by her own hand as the result of being imprisoned there

after having a sexual relationship with a black African, Mrs Emery's experiences of an interracial relationship in a deeply racist society can be seen as an experiment that failed. That Bessie Head felt her mother to be a martyr figure is described in one of her letters through a somewhat oblique reference to the scientist Marie Curie who discovered radium and who later died of leukaemia as a result of her experiments: 'Up till now there have been two great women in history - my mother and Madame Curie. My mother. She laughed. 'If one can pay the price for many - I am ready'' (9.3.1970 KMM BHP). Bessie Head herself, as a child of mixed racial origins, could also be seen as an experiment herself. In Maru, both Margaret Cadmore the missionary and Maru himself see the young Margaret Cadmore as an experiment and make her the instrument of their own purpose. For example, the missionary constructs her adopted child as a 'real, living object' (15 M) on whom she can experiment, allowing the child no opportunity to develop an autonomous existence as she grows up. Instead, the girl becomes aware that she has a special purpose in life and that:

There was nothing she could ask for, only take what was given, aware that she was there for a special purpose because now and then the woman would say: 'One day, you will help your people'...[which] created a purpose and burden in the child's mind (17 M).

When the white maternal figure of Margaret Cadmore leaves Botswana, she is replaced by the black man Maru, who takes on and echoes her purpose in that he needs an instrument for his own plans. Bessie Head thus imposes upon both Maru and on Margaret Cadmore the elder, roles which could be seen to represent those of her own absent parents. On meeting the young Margaret Cadmore, Maru sees her as 'a symbol of her tribe and through her he sought to gain an understanding of the eventual

liberation of an oppressed people' (108 M). However, Maru appears to care as little for Margaret Cadmore and her people as did the missionary, saying:

Everything I have done has been an experience, an experiment...When she walked into the office this afternoon, I merely said: That's one more experience for me, but it shows all the signs of being a good one (70 M).

Maru, then, also refers to Margaret as an experience, an experiment, and therefore an object rather than a human being. Bessie Head made it clear that the young Margaret Cadmore was her fictional alter ego, saying 'I am afraid Margaret Cadmore is me and my background' (26.7.1978 KMM BHP). Both Maru and Margaret Cadmore Senior's motives are clearly underpinned by the author's own need to give meaning, purpose and justification to an existence that stood not only on the edge of extinction, but also on the horizon between 'living death' and 'living life'. Maru's role appears to replicate the missionary's so closely as to become her extension rather than a separate and paternal figure. While Judith Kegan Gardiner (1982) discusses female heroes in her article, in Bessie Head's work, ambiguous male characters also frequently play ostensibly nurturing but also deeply destructive roles. The portrayal of such complex multifaceted characters who dehumanize and disconfirm others have their roots in the perceived obliteration of her own mother which, by extension, also threatens Bessie Head herself.

In choosing specific incidents from village life which involved those who are threatened, doomed, oppressed people, frequently sacrificed or condemned by a mother, lover or other caring figure, and interweaving them with her own experience, Bessie Head was able to

examine her own lived reality at a distance. In this way, she avoided having to fully recognise the strength of her own rage and grief towards the mother she idealized, and her own fear that she may replicate her mother's fate. Her self-perception was closely tied up with her perceptions of her mother's identity, and indeed she also spent some time in a mental hospital herself, thus in part mirroring her mother's experience. Clearly unable to resolve the ambivalence she experienced about her own sense of identity in relation to her mother, her work is permeated with a sense of the 'living death' inflicted upon her because of her abandonment and sacrifice to racism.

Abandonment and accidental death are thus fates common to many of the children in Bessie Head's work. Although some of the stories she wrote were taken from real events, she chose the material through which she could express her own sense of being abandoned and of living with the constant threat of annihilation that was the existential corollary of her early rejection. While her sense of being without a mother led her to say 'I am a mother short on children so I adopt children here and there' (24.6.1983 KMM BHP) the conflict she felt towards her mother is mirrored in her ambivalence to children. In a letter discussing what she perceived as a misreading of 'The Wind and a Boy' she says:

The author has mis-read two stories in *The Collector of Treasures*. The boy Friedman is not killed because he is a crook. My son grew up with the village boys. He is friendly and many small boys passed through this house. Friedman is composed of them. They go through changes. They are good and bad but they get very proud when they finally hit the straight and narrow road. I have seen too many boys, I don't like the bastards but I am not ungenerous to human frailty... (31.12.1984 KMM BHP).

While Bessie Head writes very little about her son, she indicates that she hoped some day to be cared for by him:

I have a little boy aged seven this May...Now that old age is catching up with me (I am 31) I find myself afflicted with a very strong desire for a little girl as well. The reason for this is that I shall be lonely in old age because my son will be fixing up all those mechanical things (25.4.1969 KMM BHP).

She was also acutely aware how the difficulties present in her own life affected her son:

Indeed I am appalled too at what my son has endured in my company. There's only two of us. We are travelling companions. There were a number of blows I had to take and since he was forced by destiny to be there at the time he got the hind end of them. It is more terrible for him because he is more than just a little boy, he is an appendage of my soul...There's no other child I know who has so much stamina and could have endured so much hell without either having died or being damaged in some way (undated letter 1969 KMM BHP).

She might have been talking of her own experience in this instance.

However, many years later she wrote in a different vein that

There's nothing of me in Howard. He's a total stranger and has been all his life. He knows we aren't the peas of the same pod and he hates me. He is like his father...In sheer anguish I often pray: 'God, God, God, don't let this child put me off children forever (7.3.1981 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head's own personal circumstances of being without a mother and her belief that her mother was destroyed by society, provide powerful and complex reasons for the destruction of both women and children in her work. Yet the advantages of the education her mother had ensured for her also enabled her to live and to articulate a 'living life' by translating her anger and grief into imaginative literature, and setting out there her own ability to survive destructive personal circumstances. This is evident in, for example, *The Cardinals*, where a young and beautiful woman leaves her child with a foster mother in a

'slum area of tin shacks, bounded on the one side by a mile-long graveyard and on the other by the city refuse dump and the sea' (1 C) before returning home to commit suicide. While there is a romantic element to this story, a fairy tale aspect to the youth and beauty of the child's mother and the child's own survival and later success as a journalist, it is clear that Bessie Head also documents her own circumstances of loss, poverty and oppression which she is able to survive. In her writing Bessie Head was also able to create areas free from the conflict she felt in her relationship with her absent mother. Alice Miller suggests that a child can only experience feelings when there is someone there to accept them fully, understand and support them. Without such a person nearby, the child will develop 'the art of not experiencing feelings'. She found that such children were themselves only free from conflict when they were in a position where they could not hurt the mother, or make her feel insecure, reduce her power or endanger her equilibrium (1991, 25). Such feelings are usually experienced when the individual concerned is in close proximity to nature. There are many such instances in Bessie Head's writing where her descriptions of nature are lyrical and moving, and where her often tormented characters feel at peace. For example, Gilbert, in *When Rain Clouds Gather* is a character who has clearly had difficulties in his relationship with his 'stupid, neurotic mother' who had 'sent him to dancing school' (102) in an England where he had never felt free. However, in nature Gilbert finds freedom:

The bird had trailed tiny footpaths through the dense-white, dew-wet grass on summer mornings, and the leaden winter skies had looked like great swathes of eternity which were there to stay, forever and forever (103 RC).

Although his mother 'soon invented a number of excuses as to why it was he lived almost the year round in a tent among the trees' (103 RC) it is in nature that Gilbert is freed into timelessness and eternity, at peace away from human conflict. Maru is another character who also experiences the natural world in a way which allows him a measure of tranquillity:

He paused awhile and looked towards the low horizon where the storm brooded. The thorn trees turned black in the darkening light and a sudden breeze stirred the parched, white grass. There was so little to disturb his heart in his immediate environment. It was here where he could communicate freely with all the magic and beauty inside him. There had never been a time in his life when he had not thought a thought and felt it immediately bound to the deep centre of the earth, then bound back to his heart again - with a reply (7 M).

Deeply connected to nature, Maru is thus able to communicate with aspects of himself that are otherwise often deeply troubled. Makhaya, in *When Rain Clouds Gather* is another tormented character, who often refers to himself as 'the Black Dog, and as such I am tossed about by life' (128). Having crossed the border into a Botswana which is on one hand a 'harsh and terrible country to live in' (115) Makhaya finds his new found freedom mirrored in nature:

At first not a thing stirred around him. It was just his own self, his footsteps and the winding footpath. Even the sunrise took him by surprise. Somehow he had always imagined the sun above hills, shining down into valleys and waking them up. But here the land was quite flat, and the sunshine crept along the ground in long shafts of gold light. It kept on pushing back the darkness that clung around the trees, and always the huge splash of gold was split into shafts by the trees. Suddenly, the sun sprang clear of all entanglements, a single white pulsating ball, dashing out with one blow the last traces of the night (16 RC).

This is a complex passage that is open to a number of interpretations. For example, as the sun violently frees itself from the darkness, Bessie Head frees herself from the entanglements of oppression, or the



brightness of the 'living life' against the darkness of 'living death'. It is also, however, evocative of a space filled with light in which conflict does not exist.

Although Bessie Head's period of hospitalization and her own early death mirrored her mother's experience, she remained free from total identification with her mother because of her own acute self-awareness. She was adamant that 'my childhood has not driven me crazy. Most human beings survive under all kinds of circumstances. It is something else I battled with' (23.8.1974 KMM BHP). In so saying, she freed herself from her childhood and distanced herself from her mother whilst simultaneously acknowledging that she took an embattled position and was prepared to fight for her 'living life'. In saying 'I used to be sorry about the way she died, except that I have encountered triple that much sorrow and stayed sane till now' (17.9.1969, KMM BHP), she acknowledged her belief that her suffering was actually greater than her mother's. In this way, she honoured her own experience and her strength in surviving circumstances which threatened to destroy her. In ultimately being able to dissociate herself from total identification with her mother, she was able to accept the validity of being herself. While she translates her own sense of desertion and abandonment into her work through her portrayal of Margaret Cadmore in *Maru* and other abandoned and destroyed characters, she also simultaneously constructs through her writing a meaningful existence for herself. While 'Losses', she said, 'are a natural part of living for me' (8.7. 1972 kMM BHP) her work transforms her own loss and sense of abandonment into her creative endeavours, making of the work itself Africa's gain.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONFLICT AND SEXUALITY

*I do support sane, healthy sex and love with a male of the species. I am one to talk am I? I have never achieved this (4.5.1981 KMM BHP).*

In this chapter I want to explore how the violence and destruction that characterize certain of Bessie Head's protagonists related to her own conflicts in connection to her sexuality, which in turn have their roots in attitudes towards women prevalent in patriarchal societies. The significance of Bessie Head's portrayal of sexuality and surrounding issues have not always been treated with the depth they deserve.

According to Huma Ibrahim 'The theme of amicable relationships between men and women become more than a pleasant possibility' in *The Collector of Treasures* (Ibrahim 1996, 48). However, she ignores the danger of destruction that saturates relationships between men and women throughout Bessie Head's work. Lloyd Brown claims that Bessie Head has

a certain scepticism about what she sees as the special disadvantages of women. This scepticism inspires a search, in her novels, for humane sexual roles and political values within a harmonious social order (1981, 158-9).

What Brown interprets as an idealized search for the humane and harmonious is prompted by more than a 'certain scepticism' on Bessie Head's part. As in all aspects of her work, she is concerned with deeply personal issues which mesh with both the social and the political and which are fundamental to her survival, and because of this she portrays sexual politics in her own very individual way.

Issues of sex, sexuality and sexual relationships have a particular significance in South African life and literature, not least because of

the mass of legislation that formerly surrounded this area. In her discussion of Nadine Gordimer's work, Judie Newman points out that, prior to the repeal of the Immorality Act,

Only sexual love remains as a touchstone of integrity, whether personal or political. In South Africa the laws that govern African lives are based on the body...and therefore have to be fought through the body (Newman 1988, 99-100).

Andre Brink is another example of a writer in whose work sex plays a major role, being concerned, he says, with 'the experience and expression of human freedom, and the agony of human bondage' (1983, 124). Sexual union and its portrayal can be seen, therefore, as a positive act, a form of communication, an affirmation of identity.

However, Bessie Head was keenly aware of the superficial, perverse and exploitative relationships that often pass for love, and their potential for destruction. According to Eilersen, Bessie Head was upset by one of the reviewers of *New Republic* who referred to Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* as 'frigid'. Eilersen's interpretation is that the writer was

hypersensitive and vulnerable and maintained solidly that the novel had been about a confrontation with God and the Devil, a soul journey to hell. Her reaction showed that she had not been able to extricate herself from the experience she had described or distance herself from her material (1996, 157).

Bessie Head's reaction appears to be toward a superficial judgement of her work which does not examine how her portrayal of issues surrounding sex reflect a reality that can often be terrifying and threatening for women, a reality in which sexuality itself can be something to be feared and avoided as a powerful aspect of the 'living death'.

The roots of Bessie Head's conflict arose from her lived reality as a woman disconfirmed by the dominant group in South Africa not only

because of her mixed African and European origins, but also because of her sex. Her difficulties surrounding sexuality were also connected with her relationship to her absent mother. She believed that her mother had been institutionalized, and had then taken her own life in the mental institution where she had been placed after her relationship with an unknown black African had resulted in her subsequent pregnancy. As the result of this union, it is likely that for Bessie Head, sexuality was thus also associated with illegality and punishment. She therefore seeks answers to questions about her own meaning and purpose in life as a woman in a world where sex and gender are inextricably bound up with power-structured relationships. The way in which power operates within the sphere of sexuality is such that it can have a powerful effect upon women's sense of themselves, and Bessie Head thus shared some of her difficulties with other women writers whose experiences under patriarchy has led to the centrality of the subject of identity within women's writing and within much feminist criticism. This preoccupation has been seen by some as having become a cliché, yet if a state of alienation and Otherness has been imposed upon women by patriarchal and/or colonial structures, then women writers have strong reasons for exploring issues surrounding identity as they chart their journey through the constricted 'moral space' they are allowed to inhabit (Taylor, 1989). Judith Kegan Gardiner points out that a central question of feminist literary criticism is 'Who is there when a woman says 'I am'?' (1982, 178). The exclusion of women from theoretical literature is as evident as it is in the social sphere; their inclusion is often depicted in images of empty spaces waiting to be filled, since because women are biologically able to bear children they are frequently perceived as either childbearers or

containers of an empty space. A striking example of this is Sartre's phallocentric view that

The obscenity of the feminine sex is that of everything which 'gapes open'. It is *an appeal to being* as all holes are. In herself, woman appeals to a strange flesh which is to transform her into a fullness of being by penetration and dissolution (1956, 782).

If women are perceived as less than nothing, it is logical that they can also perceive themselves as embodying nothingness. The attempted negation of all women, then, is very real. However, any sense women may have of lacking an identity is in itself an identity, since exclusion for one group means inclusion for another. Therefore the collective term 'women' is an identifying and inclusive term. Whether women choose to identify themselves as victims by including themselves in categories imposed upon them, or whether they examine other strategies of being is a difficult and complex issue, and one to which I shall return.

While it may be assumed that the attempted negation of women is limited to the Western male world view, women's position when subjected to the forces of colonialism, imperialism, racism as well as class and sexual oppression is also problematic. Jane Miller, for example, points out how in Said's work:

Women and colonies and invaded territories generally become available *because* they are undeveloped, uncultivated, swathed in their natural vulnerability and therefore weak, passive, receptive and intuitive (1990, 116-7).

Other influential male theorists otherwise astute in their critiques of the colonial situation have also either devalued or erased women in their work. Frantz Fanon, who remains perhaps the most important critic and analyst of colonialism, wrote in *Black Skin, White Masks*,

that 'the black is not a man' (1973, 7). He was seemingly oblivious to the implications of his statement for the status of women of colour who, in his work, often appear only in relation to men, and are by his definition therefore reduced to less than nothing. Joel Kovel has pointed out that as long as the dominant institutions of Western society are shaped according to white interests and organised symbolically about whiteness 'the black can only be Other. More, blacks inhabit the extreme reaches of Otherness' (1970, xvi). Kovel himself thus reduces black people to 'blacks' in his description, exercising his own form of dehumanization, but since he does not name women specifically he consigns them to even further reaches of Otherness. Neither are women helped by JanMohamed's descriptions of the polarities of white and black, good and evil, self and other in a South Africa that he felt had become a frontier of oppositional states of being. These polarities, while useful in describing the effects of colonialism, actually create divisions by categorizing and by reinforcing stereotypes, including those inherent in the female-male relationship. As Felman suggests, women are viewed by men as *their* opposite, the negative to his positive rather than different in their own right, Otherness itself. This is a view which is part of a

subtle mechanism of hierarchization which assures the unique valorization of the 'positive' pole (that is of a *single* term) and, consequently, the repressive subordination of all 'negativity', the mastery of difference as such (1975, 3).

One response to women's attempted negation is a feminism that, as Jane Miller points out, 'has grown out of exclusion, oppression, marginality' (1990, 69). Huma Ibrahim claims that 'Bessie Head has

become the Western feminists' icon - a Third World woman writer who is interested in women's issues' (1996, 3), and she is critical of this view. However, it is a view to which few of Bessie Head's critics subscribe to in such simple terms, since she fits no more easily into the category of feminist that she does into Ibrahim's description of a 'Third World woman writer'. Feminism is not a simple and clear-cut response to oppression. Jane Miller, for example, talks of how it 'labours still with definitions which are meant to keep it in its place' (1990, 69) after a

...lifetimes accommodations to the seductiveness of male lives and voices and invitations. There are many ways of submitting to such seductions and many of resisting. Emulation, imitation, joining are ways of consummating the seduction, and so is marriage. And both ways of yielding to the seduction may entail their own kinds of resistance. Yet a constant feature of all such accommodations must surely be the internalising of those disparagements which lurk in the language, with its pairs and its opposites, poised to home in on the 'weaker sex' (1990, 73).

Bessie Head was so openly and deeply ambivalent to her own sex that feminism was not a useful weapon in her personal struggle against her own attempted negation by the dominant group - the 'living death' of which Makhaya speaks. Indeed, she questioned feminism saying 'I am not a feminist in the sense that I don't view women in isolation from men and in isolation from the rest of society' (19.9.1982 KMM BHP). She felt that 'There is something shrill there that I do not like', and that 'some women push to totally eliminate man from the scheme of things' (19.9.1982 KMM BHP). She was surprised, and not always pleasantly so, that feminists took an interest in her work. 'Indeed', she said 'I am taken aback when women walk up to me and say *A Question of Power* is pure women's lib' (15.6.1983 KMM BHP), stressing that 'Elizabeth is not women' (27.7.1983 KMM BHP) and exclaiming that 'feminists are so excited

about discovering WOMAN! I stay out of it' (21.1.1983 KMM BHP). During her travels abroad she said

I could have met the feminists here. I prefer to avoid them. They act as though they have just discovered they have vaginas and they write all the time about the sex in their lives. I have done so much else. They go in for everything impossible - sex with other women too (13.12.1977 KMM BHP).

She did not hesitate to criticize her own sex, and often did not look beyond the immediacy of their behaviour for deeper reasons behind their responses. Her description of Margaret Cadmore, the teacher at St. Monica's Home whose name she used for the main female character in *Maru* exemplifies one aspect of her attitude: 'It is seldom that women are a tremendous inspiration to women. They are a bit selfish and mean. She was the exception' (24.5.1972 KMM BHP). Although she felt that women in Africa had an educational advantage because their interest in Christianity allowed them access to a 'bit of mission education' (68 RC), she also believed that they rarely 'developed a new personality. They remained their same old tribal selves, docile and inferior' (68 RC). Sometimes her views about her own sex were quite hostile, for example in a personal letter she wrote 'Women are very dangerous. brother, and I know quite a lot about them' (29.4.1972 KMM BHP). In *When Rain Clouds Gather* Bessie Head gives an important key to her hostility to feminism as a category to which she does not want to belong. She questions, through Makhaya: 'Why should men be brought up with a false sense of superiority over women? People can respect me if they wish, but only if I earn it' (16 RC). Here she indicates that her difficulties with feminism were concerned with the label. Her own personal need was to be valued as an individual outside any form of categorization which would imprison her. Because of this, gender



politics had little attraction for her beyond its practicalities since 'When you are truly alone and unpampered the question of women's lib does not even arise. You just do everything for yourself and now and then a male buddy knocks in a nail you can't reach' (28.12.1975 KMM BHP).

Feminism posed other problems, not only for Bessie Head as a South African, but in the problematic context of Eurofeminist theorizing and its relevance for African women. The Nigerian novelist Buchi Emecheta, for example, claims that Western women are only concerned with issues that are related to themselves which they transplant onto Africa (Watson 1992, 147). Other critics feel that sexual politics exoticize and trivialize women's 'primary and proper concerns with economic and political exploitation' (147). They are not alone in their beliefs. Within South Africa there has been the common belief, forcefully expressed at one time by Nadine Gordimer and shared by others, that women's problems are secondary to the tragedy of a people struggling to free themselves from the oppression of a white minority and to establish their reality on their own terms. Gordimer even went so far as to deny that the specific experience of women, black or white, has any relevance to the problems of South Africa, for example only reluctantly allowing Olive Schreiner her concern with a 'generic, universal predicament: that of the female sex' (Gordimer 1987, 225). Christine Qunta makes it clear that she takes

the view that we are Africans before we are women, and that the problems we confront in our continent arise largely from the fact that for between a hundred and five hundred years our land and our lives have been ruled by outsiders for their own benefit (1987, 11).

According to Qunta it is these outsiders who are responsible for changing the status of African women, so that 'From being respected members of society with a defined and valued economic, social and political role, they were reduced to landless farm labourers, domestic servants and perpetual minors' (80).

There is certainly a danger that the description of African women as 'doubly colonized', both by the system they live under and by their position under patriarchy, can reduce them to 'universally colonized' women, universally subjected to 'patriarchal oppression' and subject to, as Spivak points out, the 'inbuilt colonialism of First World feminism toward the Third' (quoted in Watson 1992, 147). However, it is difficult to get an accurate view of the position and nature of the experience of African women before the colonial encounter. Because slavery had caused the breakdown of old societies prior to any direct contact with colonialism, it is unclear which structures are 'traditional' and which are part of the colonizing process. This lack of clarity has ensured that women of colour are, as Shula Marks points out, not only 'Hidden from history', but doubly hidden both as women and because of their colour (1987, 1). Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, whilst acknowledging the diversity of African culture and the heterogeneity of traditional cultures, claims that

The social organization of production in traditional agricultural societies is closely associated with the familial organization. The ideological strength of traditional kinship therefore rests on a complex 'concrete hinterland'. Social control over access to women, i.e., the marriage mechanism, is the very keystone of the system. The woman, as a 'producer of producers, constitutes the most powerful prospective means of production'. Controlling women thus means controlling the reproduction of the production unit. In political terms, control over access to women legitimizes social hierarchy, namely, the authority of the old over the young, of the

dominant over the dominated lineages, of one caste over another, and so on (1983, 41).

This indicates that the use of women as commodities actually predates colonial intervention, and that economics and sexuality have long been interlinked. If women have little political or economic status and are exploited materially and sexually, then sexual politics can be neither a luxury nor an irrelevance. Kate Millet saw sexual dominion as the most pervasive ideology of western culture, providing its most fundamental concept of power. Although she is concerned with the problems women in the West experience, her comments may not be entirely irrelevant to African women when she asks '"Can the relationship between the sexes be viewed in a political light at all?" The answer depends on how one defines politics'. Politics can be defined in ways that are not narrow and exclusive, but pertinent 'to power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another' (1993, 23).

Bessie Head's fear of the power and control that could be exercised in sexual relationships was well founded and deeply rooted. The Western sexualization of Africa had begun as far back as the Middle Ages, when the congruence of racism and sexism resulted in the portrayal of Africa as a seductive, destructive woman. This set up an ambivalence which has had a complex effect on the self-image of an Africa influenced by European attitudes and where 'others' are sexualized on the one hand and declared sexually taboo on the other. Thus 'The non-western world...is idealized and eroticized on one hand as a paradise on earth, and on the other hand rejected and condemned' (Pieterse 1992, 172). Stephen Gray

points out that 'Hottentot' women were fictionalized as immodest, anarchic, brutish, the antithesis of European women (1979). The uninhibited extroverted sexuality which is attributed by the West to those they perceive as 'primitive' also serves as a reason for rejecting the 'primitive' as a stage that is past, condemned and even feared:

In this forcefield of attraction and repulsion, an ambivalence towards one's own sexuality is experienced and projected on to the outside world, which appears the more primitive and uninhibited the greater one's fears as to one's own sexuality. Under such pressure subliminal sexuality takes on larger, more extravagant forms. Subsequently, a connection can arise between the control and repression of one's own sexuality and the control and repression of 'Others' (Pieterse 1992, 172).

It has been suggested that the myth of Africa as the 'Dark Continent' was a symbol of the Victorian's own subconscious, projected upon it.

Metaphors of the 'Dark Continent' and the voyage of 'discovery' permeate psychoanalytic theory:

Thus when Freud, in his 'Essay on Lay Analysis' (1926) discusses the ignorance of contemporary psychology concerning adult female sexuality, he refers to this lack of knowledge as the 'dark continent' of psychology. In using this phrase in English, Freud ties the image of female sexuality to the image of the colonial black and to the perceived relationship between the female's ascribed sexuality and the Other's exoticism and pathology...Freud continues a discourse which relates the images of male discovery to the images of the female as the object of discovery (Gilman quoted in Pieterse 1992, 173).

The contradictory attitude on the part of Europeans towards their own sexuality and that of others has had far-reaching effects. In America and the West Indies it underpinned the regulation of sexual relations and the institutionalization of slavery. The black man was declared taboo, giving white men access to both white and black women and resulting in their sexual gain. A hierarchy existed, at the bottom of which was the image of the black woman as prostitute or desexualized

black mammy, while castration, as the punishment for the black man's perceived transgression, connected sexual repression with violence (Pieterse 1992). Carol Barash (1987) suggests that it is fear of women's sexual agency rather than fear of miscegenation that has been regarded as the cornerstone of apartheid in South Africa, where sexual relationships between black and white were similarly regulated, not least because of the fear that their acceptance might lead to liberation from a politically imposed morality which served to maintain the existing power structures. The political dimension of sexual relationships is one which Wilhelm Reich's interpretations of Nazism clarifies when he examines the connection between race and class oppression in which

Members of the suppressed class are equated with those who are racially alien...behind the idea of interbreeding with alien races lies the idea of sexual intercourse with members of the suppressed class...sexual interbreeding between classes means an undermining of class rule; it creates the possibility of 'democratization' (quoted in Pieterse 1992, 175).

Bessie Head inevitably absorbed the essence of the social and historical influences upon views surrounding women's sexuality and, as a South African woman of colour, she embodied the cross-currents of the thoughts and deeds that had produced her. She was, however, also aware of the inequities women experienced. She felt that they had little value in African society, stating for example that 'women are just dogs in this society' (81 CT). She pointed out in her short story 'Witchcraft' that the only value women were given 'was their ability to have sex; there was nothing beyond that' (49 CT). She was keenly aware

of the close links between sex and economics, as for example in the brothel where Elizabeth's foster mother runs. She felt

The independence of woman is certainly a needed thing; it overcomes problems of prostitution and if a woman is independent financially it gives her time to find out if she really loves a man and is not merely dependent on him for support (24.2.1979 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head's vision of women's lives is characteristically contradictory. In describing the village women as 'of no account' (3 CT), she also says that 'men and women generally had quite a lot of sex but on a respectable and human level, with financial considerations coming in as an afterthought' (39 CT). She makes it clear throughout her work however that the fear of women's sexuality is widespread, extending beyond Eurocentric boundaries. This is particularly evident in her description of taboos in Botswana concerning menstruation:

...she...even wanted him to do it during the time she was having her monthly bleeding. Many women have killed men by sleeping with them during that time. It's a dangerous thing and against our custom. The woman will remain alive and the man will die (84 CT).

Women, then, represent a danger to the community in Botswana and

...at almost every stage in her life a woman was a potential source of danger to the community. All women were given careful instruction in precautions to be observed during times of menstruation, childbirth and accidental miscarriages. Failure to observe the taboos could bring harm to animal life, crops and the community (93 TTP).

Women are described here as liable to bring disaster if they do not observe the strict rules men have imposed upon them in regard to their biological functions. Their sexuality, particularly if they accept and assert it, is also feared by men and must therefore be controlled by them wherever possible. Fear and power are thus inextricably linked in

sexual relationships in Bessie Head's work, and this is particularly evident in her portrayal of the dangers of the attempted negation or even destruction through a sexual relationship with a powerful other. In the short story 'Oranges and Lemons' in the collection *Tales of Tenderness and Power*, people of the township said of Daphne Matsulaka that she 'would not survive long...She established her own supremacy with a hard, imperious queenly stare and everyone gave way before it' (21-22). Bessie Head indicates here that Daphne's dominance and independence will ultimately be punished by her death. However, she does not destroy Daphne, but allows her to survive at the expense of the life of Jimmy Motsisi. Jimmy's downfall begins with his separation from his family and ends with his death, while Daphne moves on to live with a powerful gangster, thus attaining more power by proxy. This story shows the dangers posed by a powerful woman, who survives because she destroys others, and ultimately aligns herself with an even more powerful male figure. If a woman is unable to take control herself and use her own power to destroy others, then she is likely to be destroyed herself, as is evident in the short story 'Life'. In this story, the women of the village are described as having 'emancipated themselves some time ago' (39 CT). This has led to their behaviour being interpreted as a sign of a 'fierce and wayward female exhuberance' (Boehmer 1990, 271) expressed through the

image of the lusty resistance of Life and of the beer-brewing women who surround her, who have found ways not only of surviving but of enjoying themselves in defiance of patriarchal law (1990, 271-2).

However, the text indicates that this is not the case. Bessie Head makes it clear that the men of the village live off the women, leave them with illegitimate children for 'another scoundrel' (40 CT) to take

their place, while the women stagger drunkenly around the village, their babies on their hips. Rather than having the independence of a 'reckless wild woman' (44), Life is the epitome of dehumanization, objectification, an 'it'. Her description by the men of the village echoes in a more crudely sexual way the relationship between Maru and Margaret Cadmore:

Lesego just wants to try it out like we all did because it is something new. He won't stay there when he finds out that it is rotten to the core. (42)

Rather than having the independence of a 'reckless wild woman' (44), then, Life is described in terms of a rottenness that indicates that she will not survive for long. Instead of 'lusty resistance', she is characterized by a fear which is apparent in her search for 'everything and nothing' (41) as her 'feverish, glittering, brilliant black eyes swept around the bar' (41), while 'Her speech was rapid and a little hysterical but that was in keeping with her whole personality' (38). Life's marriage to Lesego results in her subjection to his authority and dominance since 'Lesego had long been the king of this world' (43). Taking control of the money, and reinforcing his authority with his quiet threat that he will kill her if she goes with any other man again, he reduces Life to 'a state near death' (44 CT). This is, in fact 'living death', described in terms of the isolation, pain and suffocating threat of death familiar in Bessie Head's work:

The boredom of the daily round was almost throttling her to death and no matter which way she looked, from the beer-brewers to her husband to all the people who called, she found no one with whom she could communicate what had become an actual physical pain. After a month of it, she was near collapse (44).



Rather than defiance, Life 'had nothing inside herself to cope with this way of life that had finally caught up with her' (43). There is an inevitability in the way that her attempts to connect herself with a 'living life' through marriage results first in her 'living death' as a woman who is the object and property of another through emotional ties and economic dependency, which is swiftly transformed into physical death.

Another story in which a woman might be seen as asserting her power, but instead is destroyed through her relationship with a powerful man is 'The Collector of Treasures'. Dikeledi takes justice into her own hands because of her treatment by her husband, and murders him by cutting off his 'special parts'. Her treatment by the courts is far different from that of Lesego, who is found guilty of a crime of passion for Life's murder, and receives a reduced sentence of five years (46). Dikeledi, on the other hand, receives a 'living death' of life imprisonment because, as Francoise Lionnet points out 'Lesego knows how to use language as an instrument of power' and impresses the white judge while

No one argues in her [Dikeledi's] favor for a reduced sentence based on self-defense or a 'crime of passion'. In fact, the workings of the court are not even made visible in this story; it is as though the female defendant is completely invisible to the judicial system ( Lionnet 1995, 125).

This is clearly discriminatory behaviour on behalf of the dominant power structures exercised through the legal system. However, the workings of power are shown even more insidiously in that Dikeledi voluntarily puts herself into a position which will inevitably end in tragedy: in destroying Garasego she destroys herself. In these three stories,

'Oranges and Lemons', 'Life' and 'The Collector of Treasures', different relational configurations show how, as David Smail has pointed out 'To allow yourself to be loved by another is to put yourself totally in his or her power, to hand him or her the means of your destruction, because, by and large, we love one another only as objects' (Smail 1985, 28).

The objectification of women is, in Bessie Head's work, brought about through the power of male sexuality. For example, many of her male characters have 'the kind of masculinity that women find irresistible' (45 C) and this elicits an equally powerful response from women. In *The Cardinals* Liz, whose love for Johnny is 'the real thing. I swear it is' (111) explains why women both love and hate him:

We want you because we hate you. There's something in you that we can't pin down or hold on to. You never give yourself. There's always some part of you missing...We've been doing the running, not only because of your devastating physical magnetism but because of that part of you we could never reach (112 C).

Another example of Johnny's devastating effect on women is shown when PK takes a phone call from one woman thus smitten. He says to Johnny 'All I could make out of the incoherent babbling was Johnny, Johnny, Johnny. What have you done now?' (104 C). Johnny maintains his power and control by remain distant. However, he does this in order to protect himself from a love that he believes 'turns a perfectly sane human being into a raving lunatic' (67 C). Johnny makes unequivocally clear the prevailing view of men's feelings for women: 'I hate them. They mess everything up' (26 C). Thus, in order to protect himself, he chooses a meaningless promiscuity:

Four out of five nights I'm jumping into bed with a different woman. There's something about me that just makes these damn women

fling themselves at me, but they mean nothing to me physically, mentally or emotionally and apart from the sex thing, I mean damn little to them too (66 C).

Makhaya in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, is another attractive man who feels that those he attracts threaten his existence, and that therefore the best type of woman was a prostitute:

A prostitute laughed. She established her own kind of equality with men. She picked up a wide, vicarious experience that made her chatter in a lively way, and she was so used to the sex organs of men that she was inclined to regard him as a bit more than a sex organ. Not so the dead thing most men married. Someone told that dead thing that a man was only his sex organs and functioned as such. Someone told her that she was inferior in every way to a man, and she had been inferior for so long that even if a door opened somewhere, she could not wear this freedom gracefully. There was no balance between herself and a man. There was nothing but this quiet, contemptuous, know-all silence between herself, the man and his functioning organs (125-6 RC).

Prostitutes are not seen as exploited here, but as equals on their own terms, or at least equals in exploitation, while it is married women who resemble prostitutes.

Women too, are in danger if they confine themselves to exclusive relationships. Mma-Millipede, in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, fears whether Paulina will be able to cope with her love for Makhaya. Paulina has a strong desire for a 'living life' that includes a man; she does not want to spend her life alone because she is a 'physically alive woman, and she was also physically frustrated, and what she needed most of all was someone who would end this physical frustration' (111 RC). However, she will not take lovers as the other women of the village do, because she had an 'intense desire to own and possess a man to herself' (111 RC). It is of course impossible to own and possess another person, but one can own an object or a thing. This concerns Mma-Millipede, who points

out that there are only two possibilities in the realm of relationships for women of the village. One is that they have a purely physical relationship with six or seven lovers in addition to a husband, or that they adore a man totally, which generally results in mental breakdown and suicide. Thus, the protective strategy for both men and women is to avoid the dangers of destruction through physical relationships by either engaging in multiple relationships or by remaining celibate (98 RC). Her portrayal of relationship between men and women shows that it can be a dangerous one in that the risk of objectification can occur if humanity becomes secondary to sexuality. If one's own subjectivity is constantly denied, then one will in turn deny and objectify the other in a defensive manoeuvre, which then sets up a whole series of defenses and counter-defenses. While Bessie Head describes the lack of commitment on the part of African men, she is also aware of the dangers of reverse objectification:

Women of my country are faced with a strange dilemma. It is hard to see how the situation can change. Men do not feel called upon to love one particular woman; to make use of feeling. They drift from woman to woman in a carefree migratory fashion dispensing a gay, superficial, facile charm in all directions. The depths of human feeling and tenderness are never explored. Let us have a good time, they seem to say. I am here today and gone tomorrow. Therefore you have a choice. Few women choose to marry. It needs a certain amount of ruthlessness to cajole or force a man into marriage. Thereafter he has to be fiercely hoarded, not someone to love, but an object to possess, like a stack of money, a piece of furniture. Most women are repelled at the thought and never marry, though they have large families of seven or eight fatherless children and struggle to raise them on a pittance of money they gather here and there (52-3 TTP).

To hoard someone fiercely is to imprison them, to become their jailer.

In Bessie Head's description of relationships she describes the dialectics of imprisonment in which, if an individual does not engage in the 'safety in numbers' of multiple relationships they doom themselves

to imprisonment at the hands of the Other. Their own solution is to imprison the Other, and this is illustrated in Dikeledi's love for Moleka in *Maru*. Constantly watching him and recording his movements in a journal, she effectively reduces his life to symbols on a page.

At its extreme, objectification can lead to violence and even murder. This is made clear in Bessie Head's work, and is expressed in terrifying imagery. *The Cardinals*, which features Johnny, who is perhaps the most destructive character in Bessie Head's entire work shows a view of love, as I have already said, which is closely bound up with the meaning of his own life and connected to his survival. Because of this, he is prepared to not only enforce the beloved's commitment by violence but even to take her life:

'Love', he said, 'at least my kind of love, is destructive. It is linked to my sense of purpose. Should I lose this love I would lose my purpose and I can no longer live without a purpose. I hate to say it but wherever I go, you go. If I have to jump over the precipice, I'm pulling you along with me. Maybe I have no right to do this. You are young and might prefer to believe that love is moonlight and rosy sunsets. It is not. It is brutal, violent, ugly, possessive and dictatorial. It makes no allowances for the freedom and individuality of the loved one. Lovers become one closely knit unit in thought and feeling. Should you eventually find this love is beyond your capacity or that you cannot rise to its demands, you may leave but please make sure that you go to some place where I will never be able to find you. I can never allow you to live free and apart from me. I respect the freedom and individuality of all men and women. It is agony to me to deprive you of yours' (103 C).

While Johnny's murderous intent is that of the powerful seeking to maintain his power, it also arises from his fear of losing the beloved, of losing his own freedom and independence by merging with her, and of falling under her power. That Johnny's 'love' for Mouse is based on his continuing ability to control her is made clear through his brutal

behaviour. When Johnny does not like Mouse's response to his telling her how she should live, he slaps her face, saying

'If you ever talk to me again the way you did a few moments ago about not having this and not having that, I'm going to do for you what you've failed to do for yourself. I'm going to kill you. Sometimes I do favours for people if it's not going to cost me anything. I'd like to do that favour for you but I'll make damn sure it looks as though you've done the job...' 'A dead body is of no use to the world. While it's still alive you can salvage something from the wreckage. One never knows what a wreck might produce'. He reached out suddenly and grasped her round the neck and started to throttle her. He kept up the pressure until her eyes started rolling, then let go a bit (129 C).

Johnny is insistent that Mouse acknowledges him as he sees himself, asking her: 'When will you see me the way I really am? A rapist, an alcoholic, a wild anarchist and a crazy irrationalist' (130 C). His violent language and his threats of torture and physical acts of violence against Mouse are extreme and terrifying, and she is powerless to resist him. Nevertheless, she survives Johnny's violence.

Life, in the short story of the same name, does not survive. When Lesego commands her to 'come here' (41 CT) across the bar, she is compelled by forces which she does not understand but which operate through her physical body, and she is thus led to destruction at Lesego's hands. Such forces are also exerted by Maru and Moleka whose relationships with women are similarly characterized by violence and torture:

The clue to Moleka and Maru lay in their relationships with women. They were notorious in Dilepe village for their love affairs, and the opposing nature of their temperaments was clearly revealed in the way they conducted these affairs. The result was the same: their victims exploded like bombs, for differing reasons (34-5 M).

That Maru and Moleka's lovers are described as victims who explode like bombs illustrates the level of physical and existential risk to the

women who become involved with them. More terrifying still is the description of Moleka's attractiveness to women: 'There was no woman who could resist the impact of his permanently boiling bloodstream...Moleka and women were like a volcanic explosion in a dark tunnel' (35 M). The danger of sexual relationships is made explicit herein imagery that specifically indicates the destruction of the woman through the sexual act. It is a powerful way of acknowledging the violence that can exist in relationships and is sanctioned in many societies where women are used as commodities, objects to be owned. Violence against women is indeed widespread in patriarchal societies. It maintains and perpetuates them, and is most likely to occur in circumstances where men and women conform to traditional gender roles most rigidly. Across the world, images of mutilated women appear in newspapers and on television screens daily, and there are innumerable instances in literature where love is equated with violence. In only one example Norman O. Brown (1966) in *Love's Body* quotes Matthew XI, 12 that 'Love is violence' (180).

Bessie Head's awareness of the dangers of being a woman and sexual is graphically illustrated throughout her novels and is particularly evident in her third published novel *A Question of Power*. In this novel sexually active women are defined by their body parts, indicating the male refusal to accept women as whole female human beings. Dan, for example, focuses on the body parts of 'seventy-one nice time girls' (163 QP) with whom he not only has sex but whom he also tortures under the guise of 'fixing her up' (167 QP). He breaks the legs and elbows of Miss Pelican Beak (who is named for the shape of her vagina) and forces black slime from her breasts. He then decorates her with tiny, pretty,

pink roses (167 QP ). Dan, looking 'like one of those Afrikaner Boers in South Africa who had been caught contravening the Immorality Act with a Black woman' (198 QP) is one of the major characters in *A Question of Power*. He is depicted as the 'king of sex', 'flaying his powerful penis in the air' (13) and accusing Elizabeth of not having a vagina. Elizabeth is suspended above pits of excrement and witnesses scenes of sexual perversion and other acts of debasement and humiliation against women. Bessie Head translates aspects of women's experience in a society that is at least ambivalent, at most hostile to women, into horrifying and violent imagery. Such violence is often interpreted in less literal ways in literature and in life, as for example, when Jacques Lacan refers to the "'phantasm of the dismembered body'" to describe analysands' dreams of 'dismembered parts of their bodies during phases in their analysis in which they regress far back into the realms of undifferentiation'. Keitel also cites Gisela Pankow's definition of 'psychotics' as incapable of "'restoring the wholeness of life when a part of the body is missing'" and of "'allotting their proper and specific functions to the individual parts of the body'" (Keitel 1989, 39). However, the dismembering process is also commonplace in every description of the other that focuses on their separate aspects, and is a major part of the process of looking and labelling, a process that is particularly evident in the relationships between men and women.

Violent acts against women frequently result in women themselves being blamed or ostracized. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon describes the terrible shock one of his patients experiences when his wife is raped and thus 'dishonoured' by the French during the colonial



struggle in Algeria. His symptoms include insomnia, headaches and impotence with other women. He cannot decide whether to take his wife back or not: 'If they'd tortured her or knocked out all her teeth or broken an arm I wouldn't have minded. But that thing - how can you forget a thing like that? And why did she have to tell me about it?' (1965, 207). Fanon is one of the most astute analysts of oppression and one who was sensitive and perceptive in his study of Algerian women in *A Dying Colonialism*, yet here he does not discuss what the woman's ordeal might have meant to her, nor does he examine the act of rape and men's attitudes towards it, or his own attitudes and the cultural climate that has contributed to them. No mention is made of how the woman might feel, or whether she has received any support. She is looked upon at most as property that has been spoiled. When Fanon himself is asked by the patient whether he would take back his wife under such circumstances, all he can answer is "I don't know...I think I would..." (1965, 207-8 ). It little matters that Fanon was writing over thirty years ago, in what might be perceived as less enlightened times. As Jane Miller points out

To blame women for the value they may come to acquire for the invaders and for the use women may be obliged to make of this anomalous value is rather like blaming women for being raped and for the public account of the rape as no more, finally, than a seduction. If women are to be picked off as collaborators, the pressures on them to collaborate must, at the very least, be entered in any analysis of colonialism, not left to the mercy of natural explanations (1990, 112-3).

The fate of some of Bessie Head's female characters has been rightly noted and interpreted with regard to patriarchy:

The sexual politics dictated by traditional patriarchy and the double standards which are upheld with equanimity, oppress Head's women and lead them to seek desperate and violent methods of

changing those inherent inequalities. Head focuses on certain types of strong women who attempt to redefine their lives, who break acceptable social codes of behavior, become outcasts, and who are ultimately destroyed for this act of controlling their personal biological selves (Katrak 1985, 32).

Katrak describes Bessie Head's women as strong, but nevertheless sees them as little more than victims. Yet Bessie Head does more than focus on these women, she creates them. In so doing she does more than merely record what she sees, she manipulates them in the light of her own experience and observation, and determines and controls the choices they make. While she emphasized the importance of control, and needed to feel it in her own life, her ambivalence to her own sex was such that her control over her characters was not always benign. It often resulted in their destruction, indicating that while there is no doubt that traditional patriarchy oppresses women it is important to recognize the reaction this produces in women themselves, which may include accepting their oppression passively or denying it.

Bessie Head attempted to neutralize some of the dangers of her own sexuality by seeing herself as 'so ugly to look at' (7-8.4.1970 KMM BHP), describing herself as 'the ugliest hag on earth' and saying 'My face is quite ugly to look at, so think of a very ugly woman and you will soon picture my face' (21.7.1974 KMM BHP). Another of the ways a woman might choose to protect herself from the potential dangers of sexuality to both herself and others is to remove herself into a protective place where she cannot be reached. Hence, one of the ways in which Bessie Head attempts to escape the conflict she experienced as a woman was by creating characters who are extremely passive. This has been interpreted by Craig MacKenzie as a literary weakness which he

describes in terms of the writer's failure 'to develop characterisation to the point where the various characters cease playing pre-ordained cardboard roles and take on a life of their own' (1989, 13). Bessie Head was not oblivious to the criticism of this aspect of her characters. She responded in one instance by saying:

...students have observed that the Masarwa girl, Margaret Cadmore, appears to be stiff, wooden and manipulated. This was not the intention of the author. I would agree to the word passive. Lead characters, who are going to carry my main message are always passive in my novels (7.1.1984 KMM BHP).

She makes it clear that she intends her characters to be passive in order to fulfil her purpose for them, that of vehicles for her 'main message'. Thus, she points out for example that 'The Makhaya-type man was my favourite mouthpiece...still, passive, dominantly independent, yet undominating' (1.4.1972 KMM BHP). Passivity can be interpreted by the female stereotype of compliance. However, in psychoanalytic terms passivity is a state in which one's thoughts, actions or emotions are subject to an external power. In this context the passivity of many of the characters in women's writing may be expressive of their reality. It can also express that of oppressed black men. For example, Adam, Muriel's co-worker in Miriam Tlali's *Muriel at Metropolitan* is also a passive character whose

face assumed that hard impenetrable mask of indifference once again...He sat, sullen, facing the door, his eyes staring, his lips partially parted. He sat dead still, big and rugged like the sphinx, as if he was part of the furniture, stiff and static (1987, 94).

In resembling the sphinx in mythology who is depicted as being at least partly female, Adam embodies the powerlessness of the black male under a white regime, akin to the historical position of women.

While passivity, disembodiment, invisibility, insubstantiality might be imposed upon women as part of their negation by a misogynist society, it might also be their conscious choice as an attempt to avoid the many fears and difficulties which accompany physical being. It can thus be safer to perceive oneself, and be perceived, as an asexual being without a body, to merge with the elements, with others, with anything which removes one from the realms of physicality. Olive Schreiner, for example, marked her favourite biblical passage: 'to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace' (quoted by First and Scott 1980, 68). As Roger Poole points out

The body is established as the locus of all ethical experience. Nothing happens to me which does not happen to my body. Insult the body and you insult the freedom within it. Attack the body, you attack the person. Torture the body, you mutilate the individual. Kill the body and you kill the spirit which inhabits it (1972, 27).

Foucault claims that 'the soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body' (1977, 30). In his view, power does not need to be applied from the outside, rather it penetrates the body, occupies it, animates it, gives it 'meaning'. The body, according to Foucault (1977), becomes the place where the most minute and local social practices are linked up with the large scale organizations of power. While he did not connect this with the situation of women, they are generally relegated to the further reaches of patriarchal power structures. As such, they can experience the power of others in innumerable and varied relationships as immanent within their lives and bodies.

Bessie Head's main message was to clarify to herself and to others her intent to survive. In this context, selflessness and passivity can

not only be imposed upon women, it can also be used by them as a protective strategy. Indeed, the two states can also co-exist. Pauline Smith, who wrote in the 1920s tells how Aantje, in the short story 'The Father', changes to a 'thin and colourless woman' whose hair, skin, eyes, clothes become like the 'toneless shades of the dull grey earth of the Magerplatz in drought' (Pauline Smith 1972, 158 ). Surviving on the very edge of existence, Aantje has all but merged with her surroundings, and is no longer even aware of the injustice she suffers at her husband's hands. Mouse, in *The Cardinals* is a passive insubstantial woman. When Johnny tries to describe what he sees as her beauty he finds it almost impossible to do so because 'It's a kind of beauty I have never seen on a human face...it is too simplified, too exalted' (117). In describing Mouse thus he reduces her to two extreme descriptions which cannot apply to any human being. When Mouse finally succumbs to him:

She was hardly conscious of her agonised cry as his hard kisses ravaged her mouth. For her it was like a dissolution of body and bones; with only a heart left; a pulsing heart awash in an ocean of rushing tornadic darkness; helpless at its own forward rushing... (133C).

Mouse is stripped of almost everything that makes her human; this allows Johnny to victimize her. She is described in terms of being at the mercy of elemental forces, which emphasises her powerlessness, and is reduced to a 'living death' by the overwhelming force of another which, to judge from her agonized cry, has been imposed upon her against her will. She is also enabled to survive, however, by merging with natural elements, forces that might dwarf human emotions but still allow her to retain her human, beating heart.

Insubstantiality in Bessie Head's work is not confined to her female characters since all her characters, male or female, represent aspects of her own experience and reality. The ambiguous ending of *When Rain Clouds Gather* describes Makhaya as approaching 'like the wind or a fluid substance you could not hold on to' (188 RC), 'solid all over, strong and muscular, but the inside of him, the expression of his face was so strange and unreal' (188). Even Makhaya's physical body feels 'as though it was not there at all' (112). It is by this means that Makhaya ensures that 'No one can invade my life' (111). When Paulina stands close to Makhaya and looks into his eyes, she found 'almost nothing there, just a blank, calm wall' (111). By merging herself with him, becoming his 'appendage' (160), Paulina merges with someone whose own inner insubstantiality leans towards annihilation rather than survival. The couple's attempts to find in love a solution to their individual existential dilemmas thus brings them both to the brink of dissolution. Margaret Cadmore in *Maru*, often appears to have no life of her own other than as that of muse and inspiration of both Maru and Moleka. Margaret has little physical presence, indeed 'All the force of her life was directed to her eyes, as though that were the only living part of her' (32 M). This is a role often imposed upon women and frequently destructive to their own creativity, as evidenced by Margaret's paintings which are taken from her. This emphasis on insubstantiality is common to a number of women writers from different backgrounds, indicating that there are areas of experience common to all women. For example, in Miriam Tlali's short story 'Point of no Return', Bongi ostensibly accepts Mojalefa's definition of her as wife and mother, as well as his pressure upon her to stay behind to help

motivate others to see from his perspective while he goes off to seek his own identity in the freedom struggle. What Mojalefa thinks is an 'air of resignation' (1983, 141) in Bongi's manner at their parting can also be interpreted as her sense of self weakening; 'she seemed to be drained of all feeling. She felt blank' (141). Bongi's blankness suggests non-existence, dissolution of self, of identity, an absence of feeling. Since any identity that she had is now subsumed into her husband's, she exists only insofar as he dictates how she should define herself.

It would be naive to assume that white women in South Africa were immune to the effects of oppressive systems and this is also expressed in images of dissolution and non-existence. Jacoba, in Pauline Smith's novel *The Beadle* is, like many of her female characters, saintly and passive even in the face of pain which she ignores 'Like many other simple and fearful women' (1976, 98). Jacoba is the epitome of silence and sacrifice since if women appear otherwise they are frequently silenced and sacrificed by men. In Smith's stories, women can be bought or sold as objects, like the aptly named Marta Magdalena in the short story 'The Sisters' who allows herself to be sold for the sake of the family's lands (1972, 121). These women are never free subjects, they accept their subjection to male authority figures who are almost Godlike. For example, it has been pointed out that Henry Nind, Andrina's lover in Smith's *The Beadle* calls 'a new Andrina into being' with the 'triumph of the creator'. (Sarvan 1984, 247). Andrina transfers her love of God onto Henry, thereafter existing only to serve

him, while Nind feels 'only the impatience and resentment of the oppressor for those he oppresses' (246).

The tenuous existence of the silent, passive women who inhabit the pages of Smith's fiction is expressed in the phrase 'Who am I that I should judge you?' (1972, 127) which can be translated simply into 'Who am I?'. Not knowing the answer to this question they are unable to judge not simply the behaviour of others, but how much power they might have over their own destiny, how much they might control their own existence. The contemporary writer Sheila Fugard uses a form close to Bessie Head's own in her novel *Rite of Passage*, in which a young man experiences 'hysterical' speech loss after a traumatic incident (1976, 39), linking the powerlessness of adolescent boys to that of women. The doctor who treats the young man had also treated a woman, a member of a decayed Afrikaner aristocracy who had sickened and become mad, and subsequently drowned, linking powerlessness, madness and suicide. If women's sexuality is neutralized, then the danger they represent to others is eliminated. The contemporary black South African writer Miriam Tlali (1987) effectively describes one of the ways this is incorporated into everyday life in her autobiographical novel *Muriel at Metropolitan*, written in 1975. In her own eyes, Muriel is a 'mere black nanny' (118) as if blackness and femaleness are linked and somehow synonymous with lesser value. When Muriel's husband moves to the opposite pole of objectification in treating his wife like 'a goddess' (118), his description is equally dehumanizing and equally neutralizing of women's sexuality. Muriel says she is special to her husband 'in spite of being



black' (118), and although her husband is also black, it does not have the same significance for him.

Another way of neutralizing women's sexuality is by infantilizing them. Although Christine Qunta complains that African women are seen as 'perpetual minors' (1987, 80) the pressure upon all women to remain childlike and helpless crosses cultures. Olive Schreiner's Lyndall is perhaps the paradigmatic portrayal in English South African literature of the 'perpetual minor' with her 'dainty little arms' (1979, 187), 'smooth little head' (217) and 'little hands and neck' (213). As a grown woman, Lyndall shares the epithet 'little' with the dog, Doss as if she were some kind of pet. The Stranger describes her as a child, saying 'Poor little thing! You are only a child' (240). Lyndall, despite having a 'strong, proud, restless heart' (217) is as aware of the traps and perils of dangerous masculinity and attractiveness as are Bessie Head's characters. She will not marry the Stranger, telling him this is 'Because if once you have me you would hold me fast. I shall never be free again' (237). Instead, she decides to marry Gregory Rose because he is a 'fool' (236). She says 'If I marry him I shall shake him off my hand when it suits me' (236), indicating that there are only two choices available to her: that she is in a position of power and control over her lover, or that he has power and control over her. The fear of losing her freedom is so great that she would prefer to marry someone for whom she cares little, but over whom she can maintain her own power. Olive Schreiner was a white woman, representative of both colonized and colonizer. Although she advocated political and economic equality she

did not articulate this in her fiction, nor was she able to articulate her own sexuality in any straightforward way.

Bessie Head attempted to neutralize the dangers of her own sexuality by seeing herself as 'so ugly to look at' (7-8.4.1970 KMM BHP), describing herself as 'the ugliest hag on earth' and saying 'My face is quite ugly to look at, so think of a very ugly woman and you will soon picture my face' (21.7.1974 KMM BHP). Describing the power of the body to influence others via sexuality Bessie Head said:

How do I convince a man like that that I do not wish to trap his soul with my body? I do not wish it, but my body is there in a terrible way. I cannot put my body away somewhere. The body is a positive thing, and love without a body is negative, useless, purposeless (156C).

Here Bessie Head acknowledges her own power as a sexual being as so terrifying that should she unleash it she would trap a man's soul. Although unable to deny the dangers of embodiment, she nevertheless could not entirely abandon a belief in the positive aspects of the body. She acknowledged that the body gives life meaning and purpose and is essential if one should wish to participate in physical love. To deny one's sexuality is not without its own dangers, and Bessie Head also expresses these in the images of torture and punishment which repay her own bad faith in denying her own needs and desires, in refusing to acknowledge their strength and power, or even their existence. For example Johnny's onslaughts against Mouse can be interpreted as Bessie Head's attacks upon herself:

When I catch up with you I'm going to explode you. I'm going to burn you. I'm going to torture you for all those nasty, insatiable secretive desires you've kept locked up inside you for so long. You're the most deceitful, treacherous woman it has ever been my misfortune to encounter. You built up an impenetrable wall around

yourself, not through fear of men but through fear of those powerful and insatiable hungers inside you (134 C).

Bessie Head also attempted to transcend the power of others' sexuality through her writing, although it is unlikely that her attitude was as simple as she liked to maintain 'It's neither here nor there to me what my sex is. I never hesitate to participate in a man's world on equal terms and have no attitudes about it and nothing to define, except my work' (19.7.1979 KMM BHP).

Although she could not resolve her profound fear of sexuality and of sexual relationships, she used her work as a strategy whereby she might both acknowledge and evade their perils. She expresses the complexity of women's situation by using the experience of both men and women to articulate her own experiences and observations of the social and sexual mores surrounding her. By adopting a male persona that contained characteristics often denied in women but attributed to and socially acceptable in men, for example strength, force and power, she could disclose aspects of herself that might otherwise bring disaster upon her. She said :

Some of my thinking is so forceful that I couldn't create female characters to carry them, so I am both in essence Makhaya and Maru...that quiet rhythm of deep feeling which so often builds up in me is so powerfully masculine that I was forced to create powerful males to bear the tide of it (26.6.1974 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head indicates here that she feels that the power she has is alien to her own sex, and therefore she cannot use a female character as its vehicle. Rather than accepting her own strengths as part of her femaleness, she preferred to believe that intellectually she was masculine, and in doing so she appeared to accept one of the prevalent

myths about male superiority:

I can't express myself as female. I can't stop thinking outside female bounds in broad terms like a man. I did it to Elizabeth, showed myself more or less and that is one of the most attacked characters by reviewers -- there's nothing wrong with the woman but she's not thinking like a woman; her generosity and thought processes are male...I know my head is male and I simply accept that... (26.6.1974 KMM BHP).

Nevertheless, writing herself as what she perceived as male was a way in which Bessie Head both empowered herself and obliquely gained access to powerful aspects of herself:

Someone said to me "Oh, your men are so powerful. You are sadly a woman out of touch with woman's lib. Your world is very male orientated..." No, few or no men can stand me. It's simply my personality (26.6.1974 KMM BHP).

She said 'I had stepped so fully into the personality of Sello. The towering males of my books are usually me' (15.6.1983 KMM BHP). This also allowed her to align herself with men, perceived as more powerful:

I know enough about bad men to despise them. I know that they are much sharper than women at taking care of their own interests and ruthless into the bargain. There is a hideous side that can destroy women, most certainly, but I have never felt it myself in the realm of ideas -- that seemed to be free for everyone and often when I couldn't create a female vehicle for some pioneering idea I had for a novel, I simply tipped myself over into a male character and carried on as usual (28.1.1975 KMM BHP).

Using male characters as her fictional personae was not a complete solution to Bessie Head's difficulties since they expressed as much fear of the dangers of relationships as did their female counterparts. Nevertheless, in this way she could assert her preference not to acknowledge herself as female and thus attempt to escape the constraints imposed upon them and the dangers they face. It is perhaps in Bessie Head's description of Makhaya that she most clearly articulates how, despite her conflict about her own sexuality she was able, at least from time to time, reconcile her difficulties. She calls Makhaya 'A

combination of feminine sensitivity and borrowed maleness', and says that 'I borrowed the outer male form but I lived inside that form' (9.2.1970 KMM BHP). In so saying, she acknowledges what she perceives as both male and female characteristics openly as a part of her own personality and character. In her favourite short story 'An Unposted Love Letter' by Doris Lessing, which she typed out and which was found among her papers, the actress Victoria Carrington puts this in a different way, saying:

'I am an artist and therefore androgynous'. Or: 'I have created inside myself Man who plays opposite to my Woman'. Or: 'I have objectified in myself the male components of my soul and it is from this source that I create' (Lessing 1972, 32).

Given the weight of feeling that opposes and attempts to negate women's existence, it is unsurprising that Bessie Head's ambivalence to her own sex, and to her own sexuality, is one of the most striking aspects of her writing and an area particularly illustrative of the 'living death'. Her very being as a woman of colour had been manipulated by, in Foucault's terms, 'relations of power, not relations of meaning'. He goes on to say that 'The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of language' (1980. 114). The war of liberation Bessie Head waged on the 'living death' took place upon the most fundamental site of battle: that of her own body, and thus involved considerable ambivalence to both her own and others' sexuality and she saw this as a dangerous area which, if ventured into, could lead to destruction. Sexual love proved a problematic area for Bessie Head since it was so deeply connected with issues of power and control that it could not function satisfactorily as

a survival strategy either for her fictional personae or herself. Her vision of what it means to be a woman and sexual in patriarchal, post-colonial society is uncompromising and expresses complex truths about women's lived reality. Despite her difficulties with feminist idealogues, her own writing was feminist in the sense that she engaged with the hierarchical structures which exploit and dehumanize women. Her deeply conflicted attitudes to her own sex and towards sexuality serve to highlight the complexities of women's socialization. She makes it clear how any departure from assiduous self-protection is met with physical destruction. She describes through her characters how women are positioned on the intersection between their own sense of themselves and the powerful images projected back at them from their environment. The ways in which she strove to escape also yield up important truths about women's experience generally that are difficult to express through any conventional rhetoric.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### ROMANCE AND POWER

*Only my own face is real to me, and within this limited sphere I must create, through sheer force of will and backbone, a limitless world of human love and tenderness, for myself alone, for my own needs* (A Personal View of the Survival of the Unfittest, 147 C).

One of Bessie Head's central dilemmas was how to meet her own strong personal need for a love which, according to one definition, is a regard, a solicitude for another and for their welfare, and delight in their presence. To this end, she pursued a view of love which co-exists uneasily in her work alongside the dangerous sexuality, the 'fierce masculinity' (131 C) which some of her characters exhibit and which was a source of fear and anxiety for her. Bessie Head asks questions throughout her work about how she might find a love that is nurturing and creative, rather than destructive, indicating how important issues of love were to her sense of 'living life': 'What do they do, those who love? My world is too subjective and cannot compel me to attempt the satiation of those insatiable desires, longings and urges that harass and harass me' (141 C). In this chapter I want to explore the strategies Bessie Head adopted in order to attempt to transform the 'living death' of lovelessness she experienced into a 'living life' of love and how, because of the complexities of her experience and her responses to it, this could never be wholly successful. Nevertheless, while her romantic, idealized representation is largely undercut by fear, she was

also able to fulfil certain of her needs through her writings. She was able to do so in particular through her focus on two exceptional men, Robert Sobukwe and, more importantly, Khama the Great.

Bessie Head's beginnings in life were, like Elizabeth's in *A Question of Power*, accompanied by early abandonment reinforced by further loss during her adolescence when she was taken from her foster mother to the mission school. She also carried the burdens of history, race and gender, which exacerbated her fundamental sense that she was unlovable. Her view of love was thus a troubled and complex one. She wrote in a personal letter that:

There is not one single person in this country who loved me or anywhere in Southern Africa. I have only survived because I don't need love, in order to give it and I can stand immense amounts of solitude. I'll never be missed I can tell you. Nor will I miss one small dark, selfish evil corner of the globe (1.4. 1978 KMM BHP).

In *The Cardinals* Johnny describes Mouse's experience and her response to her isolated and loveless life:

Most of us kid ourselves that someone cares about us, but she knows for a fact that no-one cares one hell about her. Most kids who grew up in homes with parents just take love and affection for granted but it is the illegitimates and the unwanted ones who find out what a scarce commodity it is. Heaven alone knows why we need love, but we all need it and in some cases pretty desperately. Those who think they will never find it just clamp up and withdraw into themselves ( 67 C).

Johnny indicates here that Mouse, Bessie Head's most silent and withdrawn character, does not deceive herself over the lack of love in her life. She knows there is none, nor does she expect to find any. Instead, she prefers to withdraw from all communication rather than face life without the love she so desperately wants. Bessie Head herself recognized how strong the human need for love is, but also how, because



of her own experiences, it was difficult for her to accept should it be offered:

human beings need a lot of love you know but those who journey into hell need love in abnormal proportions. Due to this one gets to a stage where one rejects for a while any kind of sympathy or affection to get one's balance back (27.12.1972 KMM BHP).

She makes clear her dual need for love in 'abnormal proportions' as well as for distance in order to maintain her equilibrium. She had been unable to meet these needs within her marriage since:

My husband was a most unsatisfactory partner but he believed he was attractive to women, so he was off from woman to woman. Most men are like that, they'll take their chances with women and are careless about moral values. So are most women too, it is this carelessness that frightens me (14.8.1983 KMM BHP).

The lack of commitment Bessie Head perceived in other people was a source of fear for her which extended to all aspects of:

man/woman relationships. I admit to a fear of passion, emotion. People use these sources, when aroused, like toys or sweets they can indulge in, irrespective of who gets hurt. I work from the point of view that you cannot indulge, you cannot hurt life in an indiscriminate way to satisfy passion, to seek something for your own. The great love/sex scandal is not for me though I admit that incredibly complicated things have happened to me. I learned much from a bad marriage, that I had a high, nervous irritability and cannot live with a bad man (14.8.1983 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head makes it clear that she is not prepared to engage in behaviours which she sees as destructive to life, and which spring, she feels, from selfish, possessive and carnal impulses. Rather, her emphasis is on the importance of her own learning processes in determining how she should live. There were, nevertheless, times when she hoped to re-marry. Her letters reveal a desire to have more children, a girl to care for her when she got old while her son fixed the mechanical things she could not understand: 'Therefore' she said at one point 'I am looking for another husband just now' (25.4.1969 KMM

BHP). The love Bessie Head yearned for, however, was an ideal love that would bring a happy ending to her own story:

I have it in my birth chart somewhere - lots of travel around the world, meet a handsome stranger, slightly resembling Boris Pasternak, marry, discuss literary affairs and the universe and end my days happy after all (31.3.1978 KMM BHP).

The kind of love Bessie Head envisages for herself is, then, a highly romantic one.

It has been suggested that the 'individualising forces behind choices guided by romantic love may still be too alien in Africa to be used easily in narrative' (Daymond 1989, 250). Margaret Daymond suggests that the

test of the lovers which proves their social as well as their personal worth, which is well-established in western literature...rests on an individualism which is today being seen as a part of a distinctively nineteenth-century ideology in western fiction. Just as it is proving to be a transient, historically specific part of this tradition, so it may be that although Head uses the motif of the test by love, it is not representative of experience in African society (250).

Bessie Head's concept of love, however, appears to have little concern with any such test by love, nor is she concerned with representing African experience. Rather, her concerns are grounded at least in part in her own personal experience of feeling unloved and uncared for. She felt that:

...as you get older, the loneliness takes a terrible toll on you. It is as though there should be some human there to compensate for some things, and some love you've given to life. It's like you've only given and there's nobody to give you anything...Like you've given to life, but there was nobody to personally love and care for you...and you find, inside, you begin to run down like a clock. You begin to feel more and more drained (quoted in Mackenzie and Clayton 1989, 18).

While this ambition was never to be achieved, it appears from Bessie Head's personal letters that at some point she fell in love with a married man, and that this caused her much torment. Her description of this episode highlighted how much her attitude towards love was shaped by her own experience:

I told you in one letter that I once illegally loved some other woman's husband. Oh, I was very careful about it and made sure I kept a great distance from the man. I met the man four times, the fourth time in the presence of his wife (14.8.1983 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head uses the term 'illegally' to describe an emotion that in itself cannot be legislated against. However, relationships between different racial groupings in South Africa were outlawed for many years. As the child of a European mother and an African father, Bessie Head embodied the illegal nature of her parents' relationship, and this was a contributory factor in her belief that her right to both love and be loved was correspondingly questionable.

In her attempts to confirm to herself that people loved her, particularly during the more difficult times in her life, Bessie Head said

I used to spend a lot of time writing panic stricken letters to people who could do nothing about the situation anyway...I think deep down I just wanted someone to care; once I was sure of that, I calmed down (23.10.1974 KMM BHP).

She sought such confirmation not only through her letters, but throughout all her writing. However, in *The Cardinals* Johnny expresses doubts about the possibility of true intimacy with Mouse:

But since you are a woman I don't see how I can cultivate your friendship safely. Love is irresponsible and it's something that always seems to occur to some extent whenever a man and a woman associate (36-37 C).

One of the strategies Bessie Head employed in order to establish her right to be loved with a love that would not destroy her was to portray the possibility for true intimacy, friendship and communication outside the framework of sexual relationships. To this end, she used asexual relationships between men rather than between men and women to indicate the depth and intensity possible in personal relationships. Thus, for Moleka 'The one great passion of his life was his friend, Maru' (37) and although Maru points out to Moleka that 'One day we will part, over a woman' (37), initially Moleka denies this might happen: '"But that's impossible!" Moleka exclaimed. He said that because he had never loved a woman. When he did, he wanted to kill Maru' (37). Tom, in *A Question of Power* is also typical of the characters in Bessie Head's work who reserve their deepest feelings for other men (24 QP). However, because Tom's own relationship with Elizabeth is based on deeply felt religious and emotional matters, it transcends the fearful trap of sexuality and the body which complicates and destroys male/female relationships. Hence, their friendship is allowed to endure. In erasing all sexual elements from relationships, then, Bessie Head depicted a love which she felt was true and honest. For example, she angrily refuted attempts by one critic to locate the relationship between Paul Thebolo and Dikeledi on a physical level, writing angrily:

...she seems to suggest that Paul and Dikeledi had some affair I did not describe. No, no, Paul Thebolo and Dikeledi are dead straight and honest. Dikeledi looks at Paul Thebolo only once but with worship, not love. She is involved with her friendship with his wife, not lesbian damn it! The bloody lesbians are mad about this story! (31.12.1984 KMM BHP).

The word 'worship' is perhaps the single most important term Bessie Head used in her search for a love that would meet her own needs and desires for a 'living life'. She believed, then, that 'love is basically worship of another person' (4.2.1976 KMM BHP). 'Worship', with its religious overtones, indicates her need to direct her emotional intensity only towards those whom she felt were worthy recipients of her love, and particularly those who were free from the need for physical love with its attendant threat of destruction. In a personal letter she wrote 'I'd rather let sex alone if one cannot make sense out of it and I'd rather let men alone if I do not revere them' (31.3.1976 KMM BHP). She makes it clear that 'B. Head in spite of no happy ever after has always secretly adored and understood the male species and avoided bastards but adored Gods. B. Head cannot help adoring the male species' (26.10.1975 KMM BHP). She could not revere men who exploited women and treated them as objects. Nor could she revere the oppressed black man who, in Makhaya's words, accepts his oppression and even participates in it:

...he found the definition of a black man unacceptable to him. There were things like Baas and Master he would never call a white man, not even if they shot him dead. But all black men did it. They did it. But why? Why not be shot dead? Why not be shot dead rather than live the living death of humiliation? (125 RC).

Bessie Head cannot align herself with anyone who lives the living death she herself is familiar with. Nor with another kind of man she describes, the missionary Margaret Cadmore's spouse who is 'dull and stupid...His mouth was always wet with saliva and he frequently blinked his eyes, slowly like a cow' (12 M).

By creating deeply romantic and idealized relationships in her work, Bessie Head strove to carve out an enclave where it would be possible for the 'living life' to triumph over the 'living death'. This would only be possible if those whom she loved, and was loved by, were exceptional people:

the sorts of people who helped me to lift up all that lay flat and unknown in me. I needed to know or have it confirmed that I had immense courage, immense integrity and immense compassion. I needed to be immense but only people I have truly loved could confirm this (8.4.1977 KMM BHP).

Such persons would be able to see beyond the limitations and indeed, the inhumanity of the categories in which she was constrained. Indeed, they might also free her from the 'living death' to which she had been condemned. To survive the disadvantages, the oppression and the lack of love that comprised her life, Bessie Head needed this immensity, both in herself and in others to fulfil her individual need for perfection. As Sello says to Elizabeth in *A Question of Power*: 'Then we said: "send us perfection". They sent you. Then we asked: "What is perfection?" And they said: "Love"' (34 QP).

The narrative structure Bessie Head uses to support her exploration of the possibility of romantic love as a key to a 'living life', as well as to express the strength of her feelings about love, is a blending of fairy tale and conventional popular western romantic fiction. She may have become familiar with this in her early years in journalism, when she worked for the weekly supplement of the Johannesburg *Golden City Post*, helping to write 'escapist love stories' (Daymond 1993, viii). She felt that, of all her work, *Maru* was her masterpiece because it was 'a rhapsody to love' (6.6.1984 KMM BHP) and in her letters she talks

amusingly about its origins, saying 'I am addicted to gooey love songs. *Maru* was written entirely on a love song by Miriam Makeba and I pinched one or two of the words from that song but the mood and rhythm of the song created the book' (27.12.1985 KMM BHP). *Maru* and *Moleka* are the prescribed heroes of popular romantic fiction, powerful, exceptional characters who are frequently distant and aloof. Other characters in Bessie Head's work who also share these traits are, for example Lesego, in the short story 'Life', who has a 'dark, reserved face' and 'astonishingly tender voice' (41 CT). In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Makhaya is tall, dark and handsome. He is also a mysterious stranger about whom little is known, remote, a man who was 'wrapped up in himself and walked as though he was a single, separate and aloof entity' (96 RC). Johnny, in *The Cardinals* is unique and likes to 'display that fact' (130 C). These are men who are capable of great kindness, for instance Lesego is 'basically...a kind and tender man' (41 CT) while Paul Thebolo in 'The Collector of Treasures' is 'a poem of tenderness' (93) and has been described as an 'evocation of the New Man...peacable, considerate and charitable' (Boehmer 1990, 273). Bessie Head herself describes Paul Thebolo as

so peaceful as a person that the sunlight and shadow played all kinds of tricks with his eyes, making it difficult to determine their exact colour. When he stood still and looked reflective, the sunlight liked to creep into his eyes and nestle there; so sometimes his eyes were the colour of shade, and sometimes light brown (93 CT).

All these men are exceptional, as indeed is Tholo, in 'Hunting', an example of a man who 'aroused worship, not love' (107 CT) and who stands outside a life where there is 'no order or goodness' because 'there was an order and soundness in everything he could control or communicate

with' (105 CT). In the short story 'The Lovers' the young man Keaja speaks with 'quiet authority' and has a face as 'kind and protective' as his words (85 TTP). Tao, in the short story of the same name, has a magnetism so powerful that 'He could have said anything to us, that the sky was green and cows had six legs and we would have had no resistance to his persuasions' (53 TTP).

These men also have their dangerous side, however. Lesego, for instance, took his 'dominance and success' with women for granted (41 CT), Life sees in his 'thin, dark concentrated expression' and the 'same small, economical gestures, the same power and control' (41) that she had seen in the 'power and maleness of the gangsters' (41) in Johannesburg. Lesego, like many of Bessie Head's other male characters, is paradigmatic of many of the heroes of popular romance in his combination of magnetism and danger. The women who win the hearts of these powerful, distant, charismatic men, then, are not assertive, glamorous, confident women. Rather, they are humble, poor, unassuming, often ostracized. For example, when Thato, in the short story 'Hunting' meets Tholo, she could not believe he had any interest in her because he is a 'creature too far removed from her own humble life' (106 CT). The women resemble those of mass-market romance who are usually alone, often emotionally isolated, and have an attractive rival, but who win their man in the end 'because the hero gets ample opportunity to see her perform well in a number of female helping roles' (Barr Snitow 1989, 136). Paulina, for example, the lone parent of two children, and the widow of a suicide, is the key person in mustering the women together in their tobacco farming efforts. She is also chief cook at her rival's



wedding celebrations, and in general is an exceptional woman. Her only rival in the whole village is Maria, to whom Makhaya is initially attracted, and who until her marriage to Gilbert is Paulina's 'deadliest competitor' (90 RC). Mma-Millipede thinks Makhaya is far too handsome for comfort in a village comprised mainly of women whose husbands are away at the cattle posts (71 RC), particularly since 'So many of the barefoot women, too, competed to do him a little favour...Paulina Sebeso had to stand back and watch this jealously' (137 RC). There is a contrast between Dikeledi, who is from a privileged background, and who continues to worship Moleka with 'the tenderness and devotion of a dog' (28 M) while Margaret, who until Maru married her had in fact 'lived like the mad dog of the village, with tin cans tied to her tail' (9 M) is the woman both Maru and Moleka adore. Margaret Cadmore looks 'half Chinese... half... God knows what' (23 M), is a member of a race treated as the 'slaves and down trodden dogs of the Batswana' (18 M), and had 'the experience of being permanently unwanted by society in general' (94 M). Nevertheless, Maru decides to marry Margaret because 'A day had come when he had decided that he did not need any kingship other than the kind of wife everybody would loathe from the bottom of their hearts' (6 M).

Many of the women in Bessie Head's work are extreme variants of the poor, ostensibly unattractive drudge who captures the heart of her master, and is transformed into the beloved and lives happily ever after, in accordance with the utopian aspect of the fairy tale. Bessie Head said of herself that 'there is a nagging worry at the back of my mind that I might be a very unattractive female as men never notice me'

(15.9.1979 KMM BHP). In order to remedy this, she makes her heroines into representations of herself, able to attract powerful and attractive men who are aware of her intrinsic worth. For example, Johnny sees Mouse as 'the living symbol of freedom to me. You have struggled to survive against overwhelming odds' (87-88 C). When Moleka first sees Margaret Cadmore he feels a connection between them that surmounts mere physical attraction and realizes that 'I kept my heart for her alone' (38 M). A reversal of power which now because in favour of 'someone who walked into a room and made no impact but, when you turned around again, they owned your whole life' (32-33 M). By this means Bessie Head's female characters can acquire power, although this is often power by proxy. Karen Horney wrote that what dependent women 'secretly look for is the hero, the superstrong man, who at the same time is so weak that he will bend to all their wishes without hesitation' (1937, 170). As such, he is a counter-idealization of the 'other' sex. While Bessie Head's heroes are a mixture of strength, violence, brutality there comes a point in their relationship with their beloved, when this is transformed into weakness and vulnerability. Makhaya, for example, 'gave way to love under extreme pressure and pain' (157 RC) while Margaret's love for Moleka gives her a power and significance she could otherwise not acquire. It 'brought to the forefront the hidden and more powerful woman who dwelt behind the insignificant shadow' (112 M). Bessie Head's male characters thus become a variant of the ill, mutilated or dependent hero of romantic fiction, who delivers himself into the hands of the heroine as a momentary transfer of power occurs.

In using elements of the fairy tale in her exploration of romantic love, Bessie Head enabled herself to present her version of the prince who will release her from the nightmare of the 'living death'. Fairy tales, however, have a darker side which is not always acknowledged. For example, Huma Ibrahim claims that the 'validity of her novel [Maru] comes from the wish fulfilment that a fairy tale potentially evokes' (1996, 123). She says that 'In the Disney versions of both Cinderella and Snow White the young women are constantly dreaming of the handsome prince but not aggressively' (95). Fairy tales are more than merely a search for a happy ending, however. Often explicitly sexual and violent in their original form, they have been watered down over the years in order to appeal to their young audience, and in the process have lost much of their significance, particularly in their concern with female rites of passage, of girls becoming women, or daughters becoming wives (Warner, 1993). In this context an interpretation of Bessie Head's work as fairy tale is particularly pertinent in that:

Fairy tale can offer a means to knowledge, rather than remaining a site where innocence is for ever preserved or, indeed, restored. Its fantasy turns a key to material survival, not only psychic maturity. And this is a dangerous power, so it matters very much who is the teller and why the tale is being told (22).

Bessie Head endeavours to survive the 'living death' by telling her own story, using a safe narrative environment within which to explore the threats and dangers she faced and her ability and strategies to withstand, resist or negotiate them. As Marina Warner suggests:

Fairy tale has offered a way of saying the unsayable, speaking the unspeakable: the incestuous love of a father for his daughter; the assault of a woman by an officer who pretended to be her rescuer; the abandonment of children by their parents (34).

The relationships between men and women in Bessie Head's work, then, become variants of the Beauty and the Beast tale. She attempts to balance the brutality of her male characters by a romantic, idealized side, thus transforming their dangerous masculinity and neutralizing the dangers of their sexuality. She herself made clear that she was aware of the darker side of fairy tales and their relation to everyday life:

Fairy tales used to depress me as a child. The evil witches and gnomes were really evil with horrible powers. Do you remember the story of Rumpelstiltskin? When he was frustrated from eating the queen's child, he dashed himself right into the ground. It suggests a world of super mental cunning that can only be either overcome by an equivalent cunning or just sheer luck. If you take Rumpelstiltskin and the blind cruelty of his need to eat a baby (he knows nothing better because that is his world), then you see all the sorrow in the world is of a like nature and dominant (25.6.1973 KMM BHP).

By portraying the world's cruelties and sorrows in this fashion, Bessie Head was able to exert some control over events which were otherwise beyond her control and control was, of course, critical to her. She said 'I can't control politics but I can control love. I don't think I have ever been in love in my life. I only learned' (28.2.1973 KMM BHP). Despite her attempts to find in romantic, idealized love a 'living life', her compulsion to be true to her own experience of lovelessness and loss consistently undermines what appears to be an attempt for, in Alison Light's words, 'imaginary control of the uncontrollable in the fiction of romance' (1987, 142). Her attempts to control love through her writing could not prevent important truths underlying her feelings about love from surfacing and undercutting her hero worship and romanticism, showing romance itself as a dangerous force rather than a solution to her need for love.

Although some of Bessie Head's male characters have been, as Craig MacKenzie calls them, idealized 'saviour-figures' (1989, 40), and they appear to hold out the promise of love and care, they can only admit to love if the other person is weak and vulnerable. For example, Makhaya is there when Paulina needs him since 'If he loved Paulina now and admitted it to himself, it was because he sensed that she might be facing tragedy, and that she could not face it alone' (157 RC). Johnny is another character who appears only to be able to love someone even more troubled and withdrawn than he. Acutely aware that Mouse's withdrawal from the world of relationships is a defensive manoeuvre, Johnny asks: 'How can you help someone you can't even reach mentally, emotionally or physically?' (29 C). Mouse's lack of response provokes a proposed solution on Johnny's part: 'I'd just make love to her. Love is about the only thing that will make her normal again.' (29 C). He describes his kind of love, however: 'I've provoked her, insulted her and she just retreats and retreats' (29 C). Even when the men she creates are not overtly brutal, they treat women in a detached way, they are able to maintain their own power and distance at the expense of the beloved and their coldness and detachment is hurtful and destructive. For example when Paulina sends Makhaya greetings via her daughter and he replies 'Go and tell your mother I don't know her', Paulina's face 'flamed with confusion and humiliation' (78 RC). Bessie Head's difficulties with the complex emotion of love and her awareness of its destructive elements, then, remain unresolved, even in her creation of the idealized characters who recur throughout her work. Whether her characters are imagined or based on real life, her interaction with them

is exhausting and offers very little in return:

Never have I put so much concentrated effort into a temporary and impermanent achievement. Never have I kept sense, nerve, intuition keyed, taut, alert, for the slightest clue that I had put down another card in the right place in the long months of a cat and mouse game of retreat, advance, reverse (152-153 C).

She describes her involvement with this man as a form of torture, but despite this

The simple truth is that I wanted him and nothing beyond that. But it was a foolhardy choice, because I cannot see how a woman can be simple and direct with a complex and difficult man like him. There is a strong streak of destructiveness in him that I had to take into account all the time. He is the spark to everything, assaulting the senses and feelings in a violent manner, creating a terrible and high nervous tension. Even now it clutches at my throat and constricts it...it seems that if you give your body to be burnt without love, it profits you nothing... (153 C).

Having once loved this man, she cannot unlive the experience:

Then there is tomorrow, which I may face alone, and the memory of the powerful passion of his body that will torment and haunt me forever. It isn't as though I did not know it, because the only words he said that night were: 'No one must know'. Why? Because I am the woman I am - a terrible, threatening mixture of conflict and strangeness that is unacceptable to all around me (153 C).

Since Bessie Head is strongly present in her characters, she also illustrates how the destructive qualities of the men she creates mirror her own, and how dangerous this combination can be. Thus, the destructiveness that is the other side of this man, and Bessie Head's identification with it in her similar description of herself, indicates that she believed the dangers of a close relationship with another were not wholly located outside herself. She was aware that 'should an inward longing awaken in you then your life becomes very unsafe' (48 TTP) since:

A man, vividly, passionately alive, awakens all life around him. Strange that he should be one of us and yet a contrast, a new thing, the awakener of deep, hidden suppressed feeling. Such a

man, with evil intentions, could cause wreckage and disaster all around him (54 TTP).

She also recognised that such closeness, rather than assuaging her fears, merely opened up another gulf, evoked another kind of fear 'But when we looked at each other we were frightened strangers, separated by a deep chasm of terror' (154 C). Bessie Head did not overestimate the dangers of love since, according to David Smail, it can be:

a most terrible weapon which can be used to confirm or annihilate, to blackmail or torture as well as to cherish and nurture. The threat with which we live is the threat of not being loved...The 'other' thus becomes a terrible threat as well as a potential saviour; we depend for our self-confidence and well-being on the endorsement of the other and yet we are just as likely to be annihilated by him or her (1985, 19 & 26).

For Bessie Head, able to submerge herself in others with ease, her ability to invest such a significant part of herself in others made friendship, love and affection towards others an undertaking that was always fraught with risk, since she felt she was literally giving a part of herself away. In a poignant personal letter she says:

Other people belong to other people but how often did we meet and how often was I the letter writer, so that now I don't know how to say my eyesight is failing from writing all those letters. It makes me a little nervous to think that a portion of myself is missing somewhere or so far away in America and that if you get sick or depressed then I am sure to get sick and depressed too (8.4.1970 KMM BHP).

Here, Bessie Head describes the sense of physical loss of a part of herself, and her total identification with another which made even romantic, idealized, non-sexual love an area that was fraught with danger. For a person to invest themselves in the other to such a degree also allows the other considerable power over them. According to R.D. Laing, for some people every relationship, whether it is love,

friendship or understanding can be a threatening and destructive experience that threatens their sense of identity with the danger of engulfment by another, absorption into another (1975, 44). The threat to such an individual's entire defensive system can be so strong that simply being seen becomes extremely dangerous, and they live with the dread that others will deprive them of their existence. Bessie Head portrays the ever-present threat of 'living death' which makes even the wisdom and generosity of Mma-Millipede threaten to overwhelm Makhaya, since what seem 'like mountains of affection to the lonely Makhaya' is terrifying because of its inherent threat: 'It was too extreme. It meant that if you loved people you had to allow a complete invasion by them of your life, and he wasn't built to face invasions of any kind' (71 RC). Instead, Makhaya wants

no one to be as rash as to say they understood his soul, especially when he had put up so many 'no trespass' signs. He wanted everyone as the background to his thoughts, not through arrogance, but that this emotional detachment was essential to real love and respect. The distance was essential to real love and respect. The distances also revealed to him his true relationship to both friend and foe, and in the end both friends and foes might be acceptable if they always lived on the other side of the hill (141 RC).

Another example of dangerous dependence is seen in Margaret Cadmore's love for Moleka in *Maru*. Although Margaret is the despised and unloved orphan of a 'Masarwa', Moleka initially makes her feel 'as though she were the most important person on earth, when no one had ever really cared whether she was dead or alive, and she had been so lonely' (30 M). On meeting Moleka, Margaret Cadmore's feelings of loneliness disappear 'like the mist before the warmth of the rising sun' (30 M). Moleka thus appears to be the answer to Margaret Cadmore's need



for a secure base in which to anchor her sense of self, and provides her temporarily with the strong support which she cannot provide for herself. However, when he marries Dikeledi and abandons her, the sense of security of self that she had gained through her love for him vanishes abruptly and her foundations crumble beneath her. The slaughter of the goat, the Queen of Sheba, which is juxtaposed against Margaret's feelings on hearing of Moleka's marriage, echoes the slaughter of Margaret's emotional self: 'A few vital threads of her life had snapped behind her neck and it felt as though she were shrivelling to death, from head to toe' (118 M). Margaret is only restored to life again by becoming the object of Maru's love and his instrument in the liberation of the oppressed 'Masarwa'. Maru's power over Margaret Cadmore is evident

'I only married you because you were the only woman in the world who did not want to be important. But you are not at all important to me, as I sometimes say you are.' It could turn the world to ashes. All the fire and sun disappeared because his words were inwardly lived out in his deeds (10 M).

Thus, Maru's love is destructive. The 'torrential expressions of love' (8 M) he pours upon Margaret are indicative not of an equal relationship between separable beings but one drowned and destroyed by the love of another. Margaret's nightly torrents of heart-rending sobs, and the constant threat of her extinction by fire and sun depict her struggle as indeed one of life or death. Such struggle is also evident in *The Cardinals* where Johnny, fearing his own dissolution, pleads with Mouse to avert her head, saying 'I don't care to look into your eyes. They give me a horrible sensation of drowning' (71 C). In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, although Makhaya has come to Botswana because he has

plans for a living life which includes a wife and family, and fully intends to build a life with others, he also believes that if 'love was basically a warm fire in you, you attracted all the cold people who consumed your fire with savage greed leaving you deprived and desolate' (32 RC). Because of this he can scarcely bear to allow others near him. Instead, he builds a wall to keep himself away from love, a wall that is in itself threatening 'But he would throttle himself to death behind this wall because love was really a warm outflowing stream which could not be dammed up' (128). Paulina, in the same novel, experiences a similar problem:

her plans also included a man, as she was a passionate and impetuous woman with a warm heart. It never really mattered what kind of man he was or the magnitude of his faults and failings. It was just enough that her feelings be aroused and everything would be swallowed up in a blinding sun of devotion and loyalty. Of course, if she were to find a man who accidentally managed to gain the respect of the whole world at the same time, then this loved one could magically become ten thousand blazing suns (77).

Despite Bessie Head's attempts to establish romantic, non-threatening love, the imagery she uses indicates the dangers attendant upon any form of close relationship. While the mixed metaphor of 'swallowed' and 'blinding' might appear clumsy, indicating a lack of rhetorical control in her writing, it can also be evoke a terrifying image. To be blinded and then swallowed up by an object of such heat and intensity as the sun resonates with the destructive power of a nuclear explosion, with its blinding flash and subsequent engulfing nuclear winds that follow. Such terrifying destruction recurs in Bessie Head's work, as for example in the short story 'Tao', where she writes

I would rather efface myself than face the torment of a naked and unashamed desire for an unattainable man with the face of a brooding thundercloud. So, here I drift again in the remote hush

and the silence. But the intensities awakened can never be put to sleep again and a spark from any direction can turn the smouldering fire within into a great conflagration (55 TTP).

One of the meanings of 'to efface' is to obliterate, to remove all trace of, and in this particular passage Bessie Head prefers it to the torments of love. If, as Laing points out, 'to forgo one's autonomy becomes the means of secretly safeguarding it' (1975, 51) then such tremendous destruction paradoxically becomes the solution to the fearful dilemma of an individual who feels their existence to be under threat. Bessie Head's imagery closely resembles that used by both Laing and his subjects to describe the terrifying ontological insecurity experienced by someone who struggles to survive in an unlivable situation, and includes shrivelling, the snapping of connective threads, the destruction by fire, heat and water, burning, suffocating, drowning.

Others who live their lives under threat in Bessie Head's writing are the women who pursue Johnny, who on one level are the stereotypes of women in popular romantic fiction. However, their passion, expressed in elemental, oceanic imagery, and indicates that they are pursuing their own annihilation by merging with nothingness, as for example, when Ruby expresses her love for Johnny she says:

"Love me! Love me! Love me!" She cried and it seemed a (sic) though his love was as fierce as the savage, battering beat of a high sea; or, like a storm beating down on the dry, hard earth of her body and she absorbed its pounding drive, lost and lost in an elemental ecstasy... (52 C).

The dangers inherent in close relationships of any kind meant that the men Bessie Head chose to create as vehicles for her removal of love from the physical into the romantic sphere were ambiguous characters.

Despite the godlike stature that raised Maru, Moleka, Lesego, Paul

Thebolo and others above the merely mortal, the cruel and brutal aspect most of them possess means that their romantic and idealized aspect is always undercut by the threat of the 'living death' they carry with them.

Bessie Head's need for a perfect, safe relationship with an ideal figure was assuaged through her focus on real-life men who epitomized the qualities Bessie Head admired not only in men themselves, but that she also needed to see in herself in order to validate her existence and justify her continued survival. There were two men in particular who she chose, who did not threaten her with cruelty and brutality in any form. One of these men was Robert Sobukwe, the one-time leader of the Pan-African Congress, which she had joined briefly, and had written to Sobukwe making her reasons clear:

I was not, in the final analysis attracted to the P.A.C. so much as I was attracted to your personality. I met too many horrible types of voracious people in that political party and disliked them. But there comes a time when a man states certain things very clearly with possibly unerring truthfulness and that is meaningful (6.1.1972 KMM BHP).

Such truth and meaning were fundamentally necessary to Bessie Head's sense of 'living life', and were concepts which needed to be embodied in the characters worthy of her love. whose photograph she once described as 'unchanged and beautiful and holy as the day I first met him briefly, in 1960' (18.11.1978 KMM BHP).

A real, albeit historical figure who was extremely important for Bessie Head was Khama the Great, the Botswana leader who had been not only a driving force in his country but was to prove invaluable to

Bessie Head's later work. Like Sobukwe, he had the qualities Bessie Head had already incorporated into her creation of what she called 'a composite mythical man' who

appeared everywhere. I write about him all the time - yet he is not a flesh and blood reality. But everytime I need to say something about love - he's always there - so conveniently. Don't you think he'd be rather over-used? He gets better and better with each story but how can one write about a non-existent person? I can't understand this phenomenon. We exchange words too. Sometimes he talks in his intense way and sometimes I do all the talking. I can't understand it but that's just how it is. I'm just worried that I won't be able to understand a real man or else I'll get caught out one day. He is the 'Green Tree'. He is 'Africa' and the 'Beautiful Birds Dancing in the Sun-Wind', and 'Earth and Everything'. One day it's going to backfire. I know it. Imagination is something I distrust profoundly and the way I have created this man out of air, shocks me in a terrible way, in my reasonable moments (xvii C).

The finest aspects of this 'mythical man' made him powerful and worthy of her worship. She speaks of him as if he had his own autonomous existence, despite being a creation of her imagination. This is not unusual as Watkins (1986) has indicated. He suggests that an imaginal other may have as much autonomy as do real others, and points out that Jung, for example, had an imaginal companion, Philomen, and felt that

Philomen and other figures of my fantasies brought home to me the crucial insight that there are things in the psyche which I do not produce, but which produce themselves, and have their own life (Jung quoted in Watkins 1986, 183).

He was the founder of the British Protectorate of Bechuanaland which, it is maintained, prevented Botswana becoming another South Africa or Rhodesia. As early as 1972, Bessie Head had written to Randolph Vigne saying that when she had finished her book on Serowe village life, *Serowe, Village of the Rain Wind*, she wanted to try a biography of him:

Khama is an extremely interesting personality and everything, the tone and feel of the country, are overshadowed by him - the sort of complicated, fluid, flexible hero of my other books but I think more confined to a power structure than interests me. I have worked out my philosophies, anti-power, anti-social and never

bothered to examine what it means to have a fluid, unbending personality within a power structure, to use power for one's own ends and others (quoted in Vigne 1991, 171).

Bessie Head juxtaposes fluid and flexible alongside fluid and unbending in this statement, using a characteristically paradoxical description of her hero, and showing how strongly her awareness of his personality and actions influenced her own beliefs. This enabled her to see power in a different light, and rethink her own philosophies accordingly, including the importance of power operating within existing structures as well as standing outside them. His image, according to Bessie Head, thus

permanently froze into one of a perfectionist, a remarkable African, an enlightened leader of his people, a man of integrity, and a great Christian. This image was to be deferred to by every European missionary, trader, traveller, adventurer, and imperialist. This image of the perfect black man found at last, was to create a pause in the activities of Europeans (56 BC).

Bessie Head's feelings for Khama appeared to manifest themselves in a way that was physical as well as emotional and intellectual. She said 'Sometimes, when I am sitting at the typewriter I can actually see my hands glowing with light. I love Khama the Great to the point of abject worship' (28.5.1977 KMM BHP). Khama was worthy of Bessie Head's worship in that he was a humanitarian, he was important socially, he had done much for Botswana and was admired by all who knew him. Because of this he infused her life as a role model as well as the hero of whom she said 'I need to light a lamp, aglow and keep it going all my life, I need to worship someone and I don't want to change because it means I have set high standards that I expect from a man too' (21.1.1983 KMM BHP). Khama, then, fulfilled a number of functions for Bessie Head. When she wrote that his image 'now fell upon the land of northern Bechuanaland like a magic bewitchment' (57 BC), it also fell across her

own life and provided her with the impetus for her final work *A Bewitched Crossroad*, published in 1984. He also served as a focus for her synthesis of writing and her immediate environment. From the mass of details she accumulated on his well-documented life, Khama could be perceived as having reached the pinnacle of self-actualization, the epitome of the 'living life'. He was an object of worship with whom she could never become disillusioned, since he was firmly embedded in the past, while his considerable achievements were permanently recorded. He was, she wrote, the 'lonely hero...the solitary defender of the truth as the man perceived it' (53 BC), a 'stern, austere, ascetic man' (56 BC).

The isolation, asceticism, loneliness and integrity of Khama, and his resistance to forces that threatened to destroy both him and his land deeply impressed Bessie Head, and though 'A war would rage for his land...already fought and lost by most of the southern African tribes. Khama was to provide a resistance of image and prestige' (57 BC). Bessie Head was also able to identify with Khama as someone who had himself lived an uncertain existence for long periods of time, as she herself had. She said 'For nearly ten years he hung on the brink of death, uncertain of his survival' (14.5.1980 KMM BHP). She made clear that her feelings about him were intensely personal and her identification with him as someone of great integrity and high stands were unmistakable:

Ever since I fell upon Khama the Great, I went charging forward. He suffered terribly because he was compassionate in an environment that isn't. In every conflict, he'd soar above. You note everything he says because that compassion falls against tendencies to cruelty. I think I worship him so much because so far he's topped me in everything - a rigid integrity in his dealing with people, sheer magical intellect, grandeur of style; things I concentrated on with effort, he could do effortlessly. The trouble

is that everything good you can say about the man is mostly true. Where does one find someone like that? I need something like that just now to keep me going (14.5.1980 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head's need for, and her ability to create, an exceptional man is illuminated by her interest in Doris Lessing's short story 'An Unposted Love Letter' (5.8.1974 KMM BHP) which meant so much to the writer that she typed it out and kept the copy among her papers. She wrote:

There I found my own problem outlined and it lifted it from me. The story was so deep, so true, that it was a record of love one could not record without having been through that sort of thing and that was the road I was on. In that story she admitted to an association with too many "second-rate" men. Then I understood her novels and her wide appeal...all I needed to know about my own solitude and need for a particular type of love, was outlined there... (5.8.1974 KMM BHP).

Lessing's character, Victoria Carrington, says 'I made a cool, bare space no man could enter, could break across, unless his power, his magic, was very strong, the true complement to mine' (Lessing, 1972, 38). She goes on 'No man in the flesh could be as good as what I could invent, no real lips, hands, could affect me as those I created, like God' (34). Like God, Bessie Head created her characters, and in part, Khama the Great, whose qualities she saw as complementing her own became her creation too. Khama was also valuable to Bessie Head, in that, finally, she had come upon someone who was the embodiment of the best aspects of the heroic figures she had already created in her own work but who, because of her own experiences and observations, she had hitherto been unable to present as unambiguously perfect. She said of Khama that he was

so striking and immense as a character that everything is available on him, even the colour of his eyes, his movements neat and compact, the order and precision of his daily round...But his main



fascination for me was that I stumbled upon the male type I had deliberately created in some of my other work. Once you've worked at something that's not there, you pick up the clues very fast when you fall upon the real thing. I couldn't believe my eyes. He's War and Peace, he's Lincoln, he's the austere, remote sage -- all rolled up into one. And he's the male type I've concentrated on for a long time (26.6.1974 KMM BHP).

Khama was, for Bessie Head, more than a historical figure, he was also the embodiment of all the best aspects of her own 'mythical man'. Not only did Khama possess the Godlike qualities Bessie Head admired, he could also be seen as the wise father who protected his children. Bessie Head was of course fatherless, and she recognized that the breakdown of family life in Botswana had resulted in it being described as 'a country of fatherless children' (119 RC). It has been asked whether the heroes of popular romance are really fathers, 'obscure, forbidden objects of desire' (Barr Snitow 1987, 136). Her worship of powerful men and her creation of powerful and Godlike characters on one level represents her re-creation of the absent father, perceived as Godlike and omnipotent. It may be that she saw in the figures who personify powerful characteristics a blending of both an ideal father and an ideal lover. Phyllis Chesler suggests that

...female children turn to their fathers for physical affection, nurturance or pleasurable emotional intensity - a turning that is experienced as "sexual" by the adult male, precisely because it is predicated on the female's (his daughter's) innocence, helplessness, youthfulness and monogamous idolatry. This essentially satyric and incestuous model of sexuality is almost universal (1974, 18).

The incest motif is strongly present in *The Cardinals*. Although Johnny, threatens and terrorizes Mouse, he also exhibits the 'paternal protectiveness' (131 C) she arouses in him as well as his 'fierce masculinity'. Thus he experiences 'two strong, conflicting emotions' simultaneously (131 C). Whilst the power of the father ensures the

survival of the dependent child, it can also be suffocating and controlling, even brutal because of the unequal power relation between the child and the parent, and Johnny moves between two extreme examples of possible behaviours. Johnny's language is paternal even at the point where he is finally going to make love to Mouse:

You go into that room right now. Remove all those stupid clothes and get into bed. I want no more arguments from you. You'd better hurry up or else I'll come in there and rip them all off. Now clear off and do as I say for a change (136 C).

It is implicit, then, that Johnny and Mouse eventually become lovers, and thus Bessie Head introduces overtly the standard seduction of the daughter by the father. Huma Ibrahim suggests that 'The incestuous refrain in the novella is startling in its subtlety, in that the main character, Mouse, never shows any acknowledgement of the actuality of incest' (1996, 49). This is because neither character is ever made aware of their relationship, and although it is evident to the reader that Johnny is Mouse's father, the pair can hardly acknowledge something of which they have no knowledge. Another father figure in *The Cardinals* is Ruby's father, who was 'a quiet, aloof man, absent-minded and detached from reality; shy and awkward and undemonstrative; a constant source of irritation to his wife and a stranger to most of his friends and children' (55 C). Only his daughter has the power to penetrate the 'wall of indifference and detachment that permanently surrounded him' (56 C).

Bessie Head, fatherless and aware of the very real problems that beset sexual relationships, was nevertheless open to a belief that love might lead to a 'living life' and that if the qualities she admired in

a man were present this might lead not only to an ideal relationship but to a better world. To this end, she explores idealized love, friendship, the pull of romance and the difficulties both may hold for women. She also explores the power balance between men and women, and the multiple and diverse forms of dependency. However, what resulted in her writing was a conflicting and contradictory portrayal of romantic love which indicates that the threat of 'living death' of engulfment and annihilation in close relationship with others was not restricted to sexual relationships. Rather, any form of love can turn the objective 'self' into a dead thing, thus Bessie Head's belief in love as death-dealing, and her 'a view of love that is death' (16.11.1985 KMM BHP) was to remain with her throughout her life despite the fact that:

...I do not like to be dead, in a dead-end. I do not like life to be entirely despairing. To admit it is so, yes, but to sweep on to something else. My attitude to love has been very similar. I have tended to live love dramas in my head right to their possible conclusion but not been overly bothered to live them in real life, as though one knew sub-consciously that it would all lead to a dead end (16.4.1977 KMM BHP).

Romantic love was thus never to prove a solution to Bessie Head's attempt to achieve a 'living life'. Rather, she moves in and out of representations of vulnerable selves struggling to survive in the perilous area of personal relationships, showing destruction and survival from constantly shifting perspectives. Such representations involve a curious blurring of textual boundaries which gives her examination of romantic love the appearance of swinging between clichéd mass-market romantic fiction writing and harsh, anti-romantic polemic. Beneath this portrayal, however, lie complex truths about how she viewed the world of personal relationships and what they meant to her. This meaning was synthesized in the figure of Khama the Great, a

blending of historical fact and her own creativity, in whom she was able to invest emotional commitment, with whom she would never be disappointed, and who would never threaten her existence. He infused her life with light and energy, gave her a sense of pride in her life in Botswana, and reflected back at her all the love she directed towards him, thus motivating some of her most meaningful work.

## CHAPTER SIX

### POWER PERSONIFIED - THE GOOD AND EVIL ASPECTS OF BESSIE HEAD'S CHARACTERS

*...what was getting at me was a world of power. It was getting at me in a hidden way, in a very violent way. I was being hit and hit the way I describe in A Question of Power. In my own way I acknowledged that world of power (3.9.1982 KMM BHP).*

Bessie Head was born into a 'living death' which was composed of tangible social, historical and political evils. I want to define evil as the active attempt by either individuals, groups or institutions to destroy others or impose their will upon them in destructive ways such as those created by the dominant group in South Africa who had the power to impose upon Bessie Head their own construction of who and what she was. As a woman of colour born into apartheid society, the web of power in which she found herself enmeshed was particularly visible and overtly brutal. Indeed, the struggle enacted within her incorporated the historic events and structures of South Africa which were an integral part of the nightmare world she had inhabited there. However, we are all of us all the time engaged in a power process as we try to impose our own power upon others, and resist the imposition of their power upon us.

In this chapter I want to examine how, by personifying power in its different aspects into characters who are good and evil, or combinations of both, Bessie Head was able to articulate her understanding of the dominant power structures within her life and examine her own complex and ambiguous involvement with power. She said that her most powerful

characters are

...very controlled, disciplined and vastly conceived. Makhaya, Maru, Sello -- he's all the same kind of male image to convey that ideal of iron integrity in personal conduct. Maru and Sello might be dubious but they are my image of real power (25.7.1975 KMM BHP)

Rarely unambiguously either evil or good, some of these characters mutate into extremes, evidencing her hope that goodness does exist, and that it can co-exist with evil, and that her own safety and security will therefore be ensured. Through her characters' interactions, she empowered herself to move towards an awareness that she was more than merely powerless, out of control and a victim of a particular configuration of circumstances. She was able to acknowledge that she could exercise power and control herself, and thus transcend the power of others. The multidimensional engagement with power evident within her work thus expanded the dimensions of 'living life' available to her and enabled her to transcend the 'living death'.

In a paper entitled 'The Role of the Writer in Africa' which she presented at the Gaborone Writer's Workshop in April 1976, Bessie Head makes clear that evil is an important component of power, and that it was her personal experience that led her to this conclusion:

If all my living experience could be summarised I would call it knowledge of evil, knowledge of its sources, of its true face and the misery and suffering it inflicts on human life...Certain insights I had gained into the nature of evil, were initially social ones, based entirely on my South African experience...I later worked deeper than that, bringing the problem of evil closer to my own life. I found myself in a situation where there was no guarantee against the possibility that I could be evil too (2-4.4.1976 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head saw herself, then, as part of a vast network of evil, in which there was little guarantee that she could claim exemption from

evil herself. She also suggested that good and evil are major parts of the unfinished business of living, and that their representation in her work is a process that could not be concluded. Rather, it continues on through the interpretations of others:

I found that one earns only a slight guarantee against the possibility of inflicting harm on others. Through our experience which completely destroys ones own ego or sense of self esteem. This can be so devastating that one is not likely to survive it. I had tended to leave my work at that stage with rough outlines of good and evil, which either I or someone else might fill in at a later date (2-4.4.1976 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head translated not only aspects of her personal history and the history of South Africa into her work. She also used a variety of mythico-religious figures who had their roots in the different milieux she inhabited and their influences upon her. These provided her with a rich field of material to use both as investigative tools as well as in which to embed her investigations into issues of power. For example, she used Medusa, a figure from the Greek classical tradition who combines the principles of both life and death, as well as figures from Hinduism, African deities and religious ideas that had been imported by the early colonists. Bessie Head's use of myth has led Sara Chetin to suggest that 'Head subtly leads her audience into the realm of myth where her characters become so stylized that no reader is allowed to identify with them' (1989, 115). Whether this was Bessie Head's intention or not is of course arguable. What is more important is that, as South African writer Andre Brink states

whatever else myth may have been in its successive stages... (Egypt, Greece, Rome, and Scandinavia to the psychologies of Freud and Jung and the anthropologies and semiotics of Levi-Strauss and Barthes), what appears to me its most valid aspect in the modern literary context, is its ceaseless efforts to transcend the mere facts of things in order to arrive at what may be termed their *truth*... By enquiring into the how, why and wherefore of existence, myth tries

to explain...why the world is what it is; and what the place of man is within it (1983, 215).

Chetin argues that we must 'learn to use the mythic imagination to shape our own moral vision of a future where we will no longer remain "outsiders", exiled from ourselves and each other' (1989, 115). Bessie Head was concerned not only with possible futures, but also with the past that had played such a major part in creating her, and with the possibility of creating from it a present that was acceptable to her. Her use of mythicoreligious influences, then, had a very practical application, and many were derived from the experiences and influences passed on by the early South African settlers who were driven from their land by what they perceived as evil. They went to their new land to do God's will, carrying their perceptions of evil and good with them. When Leslie Fiedler said of American writers that they inhabit a 'country on the "frontier"...the margin where the theory of original goodness and the fact of original sin come face to face' (1975, 27) he made a point that is also deeply pertinent to a South Africa that shared its Puritan background. There, the colonizers imposed these concepts on the indigenous population, who in their turn incorporated the settlers' perceptions of them into their own self-image. Rooted in Calvinist notions of original sin and the polarization of salvation and damnation, these concepts eventually came to underpin Apartheid itself. Calvinist theology stresses the powerlessness of human beings as a necessary part of their reliance on an all-powerful God, and the belief that some - namely Calvinists themselves - are predestined to grace, while eternal damnation is inevitable for others. Much missionary image-building in



Africa compounded this with horror stories about the African peoples 'swarming with satanic butcheries and perversities' (Pieterse 1992, 69-70). The witch doctor's domain was depicted as that of the devil, and the African interior equated with hell. These images sharply contrasted with that of white Europeans who were seen as combatting dark and evil forces, and with the idealized image of the missionary as hero, preaching and healing, teaching and baptizing (71). Such contrasting images are incorporated into Bessie Head's work, as for example in *A Question of Power*, where Sello points out about white people that 'most of the Gods are born among them' (29 QP). This is a view which contradicts Makhaya's recognition in *When Rain Clouds Gather* that

...perhaps there was no greater crime as yet than all the lies Western civilization had told in the name of Jesus Christ...People could do without religions and Gods who died for the sins of the world and thereby left men without any feeling of self-responsibility for the crimes they committed. This seemed to Makhaya the greatest irony of Christianity. It meant that a white man could forever go on slaughtering black men simply because Jesus Christ would save him from his sins. Africa could do without a religion like that (134 RC).

Despite the destructive dimension of Christianity and its part in the oppressive systems of South Africa, Bessie Head also recognized its paradoxical importance both in her own life and within South African life as a means of survival:

...My foster mother was not Indian, she was coloured like me - Each evening she prayed loudly to God, but then so did all black people. Once they caught on to the idea of God, plus Jesus Christ, they clung desperately to it but everything else was taken away from them, their land, their dignity and they were misused and exploited. I have lain back in anguish at one's sheer helplessness in the face of that situation (30.12.1978 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head's incorporation of characters and elements from Christianity into her work is particularly evident in the unpublished prototype to *A*

*Question of Power.* This was a piece which she capitalized in her letters as PATTERNS, PICTURES, IMPRESSIONS (undated letter KMM BHP). The title of this piece emphasizes the immediacy as well as the cinematic quality of Bessie Head's experiences. In it she herself moves within characters derived from the Bible, who in turn transmute into others, showing power as a process:

I was the David of the Bible who slaughtered Uriah to get his wife, Bathsheba. This Bathsheba turned up in the form of the man 'Deep Ridge' and the present wife was the great old general Uriah. There was a shocking thing to this 'Deep Ridge' man. He used to have a big, yellow light in his eyes and this caused all the commotion and fury and fury and hell that went on for four years (undated letter KMM BHP).

Bessie Head infused power into a range of characters which enabled her to 'shy away from the single dominating figure. All should be Christ' (30.12.1978 KMM BHP). She pointed out that personal power was not her ultimate aim, and that she did not personally

want to be the being in the sky. I want to be me and me is oh so jolly most times. That was why I used the D.H. Lawrence quote at the beginning of my book. 'Only man can fall from God, only Man...' It follows then that Man is God. That was all I was saying (30.12.1978 KMM BHP).

She is clear in this statement that she believes that Man has power that equals that of God, and that there is thus no dominating figure. She also takes a view that is a combination of the pragmatic and the spiritual. This allows an individual to listen to their inner voice as appropriate, since within that voice is a divine spark:

Many Gods come and go, some say one thing and some say another, and we have to obey the God of the innermost hour. It is the multiplicity of gods within us make up the Holy Ghost. The next era is the era of the Holy Ghost (30.12.1978 KMM BHP).

Whilst acknowledging Christianity and its importance, Bessie Head was also interested in expanding her religious, mythical and philosophical base. Whilst in South Africa, she developed a serious interest in Asian religions, an interest which, ironically, was kindled by South Africa's apartheid laws which forced her

to a library donated to the community by an Asian man. He of course stuffed it with Hindu philosophy. Lord, it's a rich world! I read nothing else for two years. India was religion itself, the whole land and the life of the spirit was mapped out to the last possible detail (30.12.1978 KMM BHP).

Hinduism, in particular, gave her a framework to support her spiritual concepts, and is, of course, a way of life rather than a separate facet of life that can be neatly filed under the heading of religion. The chance of redemption in some future life was an attractive possibility for Bessie Head, and in Hinduism the individual is bound up with Karma, the belief that action causes the round of rebirth or Samsara. The release from this is Moksa, known as Nirvana in Buddhism, the ultimate state one can reach (Gregory 1987, 357). Hinduism allowed Bessie Head another very rich dimension to her existence:

My earlier work was filled with personal data and responses to challenges that were on the whole internal and private. I feel that people, in so far as they are able, need to have a sense of alertness about destiny, a sort of alertness about their spiritual history. The canvas on which I have worked was influenced by a belief in the Hindu view of rebirth and reincarnation. Such a belief influences one to the view that each individual, no matter what their present origin and background may be, is really the total embodiment of human history with a vast accumulation of knowledge and experience stored in the subconscious mind (Ms. of interview for Drum magazine, February 1982, KMM BHP).

In this view Bessie Head sees herself as the embodiment of the accumulation of the whole history of humankind. Thus, although she does not have a family history, she is nevertheless able to locate herself in the world and even beyond, in her endeavours to maintain a 'living

life'. She was thus able to move beyond the constraints of time and the universe and establish herself imaginatively within a cycle which allowed her a sense of the possibility of safety, continuity and even ultimate perfection after innumerable, sometimes very terrible lives. Hinduism, then, provided Bessie Head with an alternative vision of reality:

Man sat down and concentrated on the unreal world that was very real to them and then carefully mapped out their observations. The height of Hinduism is austere discipline and loftiness in meditation on the spirit (30.12.1978 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head's perceptions of the God of Hinduism were valuable in helping her to survive and much of her work addresses the battle between extremes of both good and evil:

The Hindus faced a broader concept of God than that presented by Christianity and had it (Hinduism) not absorbed me at one stage I might not have survived so long. They say: 'We know of a God of both good and evil, the saint struggling against the sinner until the saint dominates' (31.3.1970 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head wove her interest in Asian religions closely into her work, pointing out in *A Question of Power*, for example, that one of Sello's aspects is that of a holy man, the 'Krishna and Rama' of 'the poor of India' (32). He is also Buddha 'I'm very old, you know, in my soul. I have completed a billion cycles in my destiny' (34). However, her interests have not always been accepted critically with the spiritual openness she herself exhibited. Gillian Stead Eilerson, in her biography of Bessie Head, *Thunder Behind her Ears*, states that the writer's feelings about reincarnation represented 'disturbing signs of mental instability' (1996, 85). Bessie Head's enthusiasm for different ways of being, particularly those in which oppression, aggression, self-

seeking and materialism had ceased to be the dominant mode of existence, are shared by millions of people. An interest in not only well established spiritual beliefs but also the New Metaphysics and New Age philosophies that are currently gaining in popularity, does not necessarily indicate signs of 'mental instability'.

Bessie Head's attraction to beliefs which involve an ultimate merging with something beyond oneself arose in part from her own desire for expansion and merging with something greater than herself, and the dangers and benefits of merging and dependence run throughout Bessie Head's work. These are expressed in different contexts and have no single, static meaning. Many of her characters feel their lives to be determined by powerful external forces which can be destructive. However, merging with something or someone more powerful than themselves can also paradoxically ensure their survival. One aspect of the supernatural or religious power Bessie Head describes echoes Erich Fromm's idea (1950) of the religious experience as one of extreme dependence. In this context powerful characters in her work become the equivalent of Fromm's 'magic helper' (150). For example, in *A Question of Power* a religious figure such as Sello is depended upon and also identified with because Elizabeth feels unable to cope alone. However, Elizabeth's identification with Sello becomes threatening to her, since it may be that 'she had made too close an identification with Sello for her own comfort and safety' (25 QP). Thus the dangers of becoming dependant upon another, of merging, of losing one's self in another, become clear. Such a dangerous dependency is also seen shown in Mouse, in *The Cardinals* who says 'I only live with half of myself' (83 C) and

is almost totally dependent upon Johnny. Margaret Cadmore, too, experiences these dangers when she becomes totally dependent first on Moleka, then on Maru. These are both kings of opposing kingdoms (34) with godlike qualities; Moleka, for example, always seemed to have 'God under his skin' (57 M) and was 'a sun around which spun a billion satellites. All the sun had to do was radiate force, energy, light' (58 M). Yet even he is dependent upon another, and 'had to wait until his door was opened by another hand. Moleka is only half a statement of his kingdom. Someone else makes up the whole. It is the person he now loves' (58 M). Since this person is the apparently powerless Margaret Cadmore, it is evident that Moleka's kingdom must be composed of both powerful and powerless, and the interdependence of Bessie Head's characters, where even the powerful exhibit dependency needs, indicate her understanding of power as a fluctuating process rather than a static state. This allows her the latitude to acknowledge that even a relatively powerless person such as herself can exercise some power against forces that might be both powerful and malign, as evident in *A Question of Power*. There, they affect Elizabeth's life dramatically:

Something was going drastically wrong with her own life. Just the other day she had broken down and cried. Her loud wail had only the logic of her inner torment, but it was the same thing; the evils overwhelming her were beginning to sound like South Africa from which she had fled. The reasoning, the viciousness were the same, but this time the faces were black and it was not local people. It was large, looming soul personalities (57 QP).

Here, Bessie Head suggests that the overwhelming evil that threatened her with its 'living death' also exists on a plane other than the physical. This helped her to put her own role in its horrors into perspective. If one is persecuted by one's own kind, then there may arise the belief that the persecution is somehow deserved. However, if

one is persecuted by supernatural powers, there is the possibility that they may be random and undeserved.

Because she had successfully internalized the effects of power upon her life, Bessie Head did not always directly attribute its workings to external sources. She claimed at one point that in comparison to 'the horror of my own life the deeds of South Africa are innocent evil' (25.2.1969 KMM BHP). While it is not easy to interpret Bessie Head's frequently contradictory use of language, by 'innocent evil' she appears to mean that the institutionalized evil she perceived in South Africa was an impersonal force in contrast to that which raged within her and which affected her personally. Bessie Head's powerful and controlling 'soul personalities' thus enabled her to delegate some of the responsibility for what had happened in her life to external powers rather than accepting wholly the guilt and self-blame for her plight which is characteristic of the powerless. This view is made clear in *The Cardinals*: 'I want something to share the blame because I am stark-terrified at what I may be driven to do' (156 C). By personifying the powerful influences upon her, Bessie Head was able to clarify that the source of oppression was external, and specifically located in the 'power people' (19 QP) of whom she said

Once you stared the important power-maniac in the face you saw that he never saw people, humanity, compassion, tenderness. It was as though he had a total blank spot and only saw his own power, his influence, his self. It was not a creative function. It was death. What did they gain, the power people, while they lived off other people's souls like vultures? Did they seem to themselves to be most supreme, most God-like, most wonderful, most cherished? (19 QP).

It was upon these 'power people', then, that Bessie Head placed the blame for suffering since for them, 'man was not holy to man, he could be tortured for his complexion, he could be misused, degraded and killed' (205 QP).

Once Bessie Head moved to Botswana the already tangible evils of oppression that had operated in South Africa found their objective correlative in her experiences in a country with its own specific power structures. Her complex relationship to power processes did not lessen there, since she had become a stateless person, belonging nowhere geographically as well as racially and existentially. Her isolation sharply contrasted with the apparent sense of belonging felt by the Batswana and by the innumerable foreign volunteers who passed through the country by choice. While Bessie Head had left a country where, for her, the objects of hatred and fear were white people who were clearly more powerful than she, in Botswana, the power structures were African. Africans now became the focus of her hatred and fear as is evidenced by her statement: 'If you saw the soul of the black man the way I saw it, you'd feel afraid' (134 QP). In referring to the soul, Bessie Head expresses her sense of exclusion and fear in religious terms. Elizabeth, in particular, feels that 'In almost every way she had to be aware of Africans as a special holy entity and deep mystery' (159 QP). Her fear of the white power structures with which she had been familiar in South Africa is now translated into those of Botswana. She describes what she perceives as the conceit and arrogance of those in power, their own hatred of the powerless, and their own control and secrecy thus: 'The African grin said so much. It was hatred. It was control of a



situation. It was top-secret information' (108 QP). The sense of exclusion and lack of power Bessie Head experienced in Botswana is highlighted through the character of Medusa:

The wild-eyed Medusa was expressing the surface reality of African society. It was shut in and exclusive. It had a strong theme of power-worship running through it, and power people needed small, narrow, shut-in worlds. They never felt secure in the big, wide flexible universe where there were too many cross-currents of opposing thought (38 QP).

The world of which Bessie Head was a part was one far removed from the 'big, wide flexible universe' (38 QP) she favoured; it was narrow and constricted by the power of others. One way in which she articulated the sense of powerlessness she felt as the result of such constraints, as well as the lack of control over her life, is through characters who are described as little more than transparent, powerless puppets. For example in *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth experiences herself as 'a wilting puppet' (13) and a 'blabbermouth' (40) who has 'no secrets' (38) and who is 'a pinned-down victim of approaching death' (87). Secrecy and transparency are both, then, aspects of complex power processes. Even the powerful, while they can see through the powerless who are transparent to them, are not free from fear of others' power. For example, although Maru has second sight (49 M) 'There were so few secrets in the society - the guilty party always told someone - that revenge was swift' (21 QP). Maru feels that

People were horrible to him because they imagined that their thoughts and deeds were concealed when he could see and hear everything, even their bloodstreams and the beating of their hearts. If they knew all that he knew, would they not have torn him to shreds some time ago, to keep the world the way it was where secrets and evil bore the same names? (7 M).

Bessie Head had been born and brought up in an environment where the power structures were clearly visible, and her choices within that structure were limited. Nevertheless, she had the freedom to believe that human beings are more than powerless puppets, and understood that power is an illusion created and maintained by the powerful, which is kept a closely guarded secret in order that the powerless accept it as reality.

In Botswana, Bessie Head found herself on the frontier between two cultures in a country which, though it bordered South Africa, had escaped South Africa's fate. It was also saturated with its own supernatural figures and she used these in her attempt to understand her own experience and her place in the world. In African folklore, power is seen as deriving from magic, and the most powerful magic of all is that possessed by a king (Canonici 1989, 83). The nearest equivalent to a king in Botswana was its President, Sir Seretse Khama, whose summer residence was in Serowe. It was perhaps because of his power, prominence and wealth which highlighted the divide between rich and poor in Botswana and echoed the hierarchical structure of South Africa with which Bessie Head was familiar, that she chose to translate him into Sello of *A Question of Power*. However, Bessie Head's identification of demons with living persons is also a part of Botswana tradition in which there are day witches, evil people who can be identified in day to day life (20.6.1980 KMM BHP). Sello, Dan and Medusa, in *A Question of Power*, are all characters who have the supernatural, shapeshifting qualities of the day witches. Sello, for example, is on one hand an ordinary villager and on the other a terrifying and powerful being who

transforms himself into the brown-suited Sello, while his wife is transformed into the terrifying Medusa. In this context the witchcraft with which Bessie Head became familiar on her arrival in Botswana provides her with another idiom in which to present her experience. She said:

...something was wrong...immediately I came to Serowe. I felt a "presence" walk right into the hut where I lived and I began to have very disturbed experiences. I would apparently be sleeping and a long nail would be hammered through my head from one side to the other. I would wake up with the impression of violence done to me but be quite alive the next day. The presence identified itself with a living man in the village (20.6.1980 KMM BHP).

Other incidents took place in the village that showed that witchcraft still thrived there, and they affected Bessie Head profoundly:

We have cases here of people being found on footpaths with their brains scooped out, and the ghouls who took the brains get power out of it. I just don't think it possible but God knows what I went through here. It was so terrible I called it Satan for lack of a proper name (4.4.1974 KMM BHP).

To this day, witchcraft remains very much a part of daily life in Botswana. In November 1983 the Botswana Daily News ran an account of a court case involving allegations of hypnosis, magic, conspiracy and threat of murder. Eleven church members were reputed to have travelled to distant places on baboon skins, and had ordered another member 'through the evil power' to do 'abominable and malevolent deeds'. They were fined 1100 pula to be paid within 21 days (BDN 14.11.1983). In 1993 a correspondent to the same newspaper expressed the view that 'we would like a situation whereby, those found to be in practise of *boloi* be clubbed to death or imprisoned for life because they are a social problem' (BDN 9.7.1993). The *boloi*, or *Baloi*, are the unseen night witches or wizards who enter the body of their victims at night,

disturbing their sleep and causing them pain in the head and chest, and Bessie Head reported that any form of the hideous and the obscene brings joy to them (20.6.1980 KMM BHP). She described witchcraft as 'one of the most potent evils in the society' and said that the 'people afflicted by it often suffered from a kind of death-in-life' (47 CT), language resembling that which she used in her description of Makhaya's fear of a 'living death'. Many of Bessie Head's characters are aware of the power of witchcraft, practice it or fall prey to it in some way. Upon his arrival in Botswana, for example, Makhaya worries about the witchdoctors and keeps an alert eye open for their fires and huts (11 RC). Elizabeth, in *A Question of Power*, feels that witchery is the 'only savagely cruel side to an otherwise beautiful society' (21) and that it involved 'terror tactics people used against each other' (21). Because of Maru's power the villagers speculate that he may be a witchdoctor:

Thus, the woman whom Maru made love to were highly envied. People said: "Oh, and when is the marriage to take place?". A month or so later the girl would flee the village or become insane. A terror slowly built up around the name of Maru because of these events. In their conversations at night they discussed the impossible, that he was the reincarnation of Tladi, a monstrous ancestral African witch-doctor who had been a performer of horrific magic (36 M).

Maru is also described as 'a demon' (70 M) and 'life was not worth living if you were on the bad side of Maru. He'd terrorize you into the grave' (92 M). Moreover, the anxiety that 'people were vulnerable to attack or to assault from an evil source, was always present' (47 CT).

Nevertheless Bessie Head accepted that:

Everything in the society was a mixture of centuries of acquired wisdom and experience, so witchcraft belonged there too; something people had carried along with them from ancestral times. Every single villager believes that at some stage in his life 'something'

got hold of him; all his animals died and his life was completely smashed up (47 CT).

The threat of the 'living death', then, was never far away in Botswana and meshed with the threat posed against Bessie Head by the oppressive systems of South Africa that she had internalized and brought with her to a country where the power of witchcraft was:

entirely a force of destruction which people experienced at many levels. Since in olden times, the supreme power of sorcery or witchcraft was vested in the chiefs or rulers, it can be assumed that this force had its source in a power structure that needed an absolute control over the people (47 CT).

Because Bessie Head recognized that power processes were complex, her experience of their workings first in South Africa and then of witchcraft in Botswana led her to question the meaning of the terrifying experiences she had there, which she translated most directly into *A Question of Power*. She speculated whether it

might not be the classic struggle with God and the Devil I thought it was. It might simply be local African horror and I might have put my grand and faulty imagination into something I don't understand. Because all I have left is the horror and perhaps people don't know anything about how Baloi work and how they go on and on behind the scenes. I simply thought that that brutal horror was the same thing that got hold of Hitler. It might simply be local and African and something I don't understand at all (12.11.1973 KMM BHP).

That Bessie Head was able to question power throughout her work was in part facilitated by her position on the horizon of tradition and modernity, South Africa and Botswana, black and white. This enabled her to consider a number of possible origins of evil rather than to attribute it to one particular cause. For example, in the short story 'Witchcraft':

...everything in the end was reduced to witchcraft. And yet, tentatively, one could concede that there was a terrible horror present in the society. Was it only human evil, that in some

inexplicable way could so direct its energies that it had the power to inflict intense suffering or even death on others? (48 CT).

Here Bessie Head concluded that there was not one specific source of evil but that evil was an inherent part of destructive power processes. This is evident in her understanding that a blending of what she terms 'tribalism', along with witchcraft and politics had not only worked to the advantage of the colonialists but had also left a powerful, though often poorly understood, residue which affected individuals in the present. For example Matenge, the Batswana chief in *When Rain Clouds Gather* embodies an accumulation of both personal and historical influences which result in his 'long, gloomy, melancholy, suspicious face and his ceaseless intrigues, bitter jealousy and hatred' (45). Matenge is described as being driven by a devil that 'would quickly subside, only to awaken its clamouring and howling a few months later' (23), and his relationship with Joas Tsepe, the Pan-Africanist, draws a parallel between the power that lies at the source of politics with that at the heart of witchcraft. Both are perpetuated within the imprisoning and claustrophobic world governed by the will to power:

The opposition political parties had long been aligned to the Pan-African movement. They also called themselves the vanguard of African nationalism in southern Africa. To many, Pan-Africanism is an almost sacred dream, but like all dreams it also has its nightmare side, and the little men like Joas Tsepe and their strange doings are the nightmare. If they have any power at all it is the power to plunge the African continent into an era of chaos and bloody murder (47 RC).

In the pursuit of an understanding of the evils of power and the possibilities of overcoming them, Bessie Head sometimes polarizes good and evil into separate characters. If concepts of good and evil are polarized and bounded by death, this might radically simplify the human

condition as exemplified in the short story 'Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest'. Here, Bessie Head tells the story of two prophets, completely opposed in their natures. Jacob is honest but poor, Lebojang is dishonest but rich, his wealth coming in part from having defrauded Jacob of his inheritance, and in part from his exploitation of people:

Such was the power of Lebojang; he would come out with names and dates and prophesies. His charges for these services were very high. It did not matter to him that people were secretly poisoned or driven mad by his prophesies; he simply took his money and that was that. But at least these prophesies of names and dates could bear the light of day. Once his other deeds became known people were to ponder deeply on the nature of evil (28 CT).

Lebojang becomes involved in ritual murder, and with a witchdoctor, and is implicated in the cutting up of a dead child (36 CT), while Jacob is a passive figure who, obeying the voice of God, eventually triumphs. In another short story entitled 'A Power Struggle' this theme is pursued. Two brothers, Davhana and Baeli have opposing personalities - Davhana is his father's successor; known as the 'Beautiful One' (74 TTP) he always reaches towards love and friendship. His brother, Baeli, whose personality is turned inward into 'a whirlpool of darkness' (74 TTP), challenges his brother's position. The universe the brothers inhabit has an intelligence of its own: it has a dream that is not 'the law of the jungle or the survival of the fittest but a dream that had often been the priority of saints - the power to make evil irrelevant' (72 TTP). In this tale, Bessie Head presents the power struggle between good and evil in the form of a dialogue between the two which 'forced people under duress to make elaborate choices' (77 TTP) but that is overseen by a greater power.

Despite Bessie Head's attempts to locate power and evil in specific characters and thus present the history of the many complex power struggles enacted within Southern Africa in a form that was pared down to its essentials, her 'power people' are more often complex creations who synthesize extremes of both good and evil. Maru is paradigmatic of the characters in Bessie Head's work who are complex and contradictory. While he has a demonic aspect, he is also described as 'almost a God in his kindness towards people' (28 M) and a great man:

Who else had been born with such clear, sharp eyes that cut through all pretence and sham? Who else was a born leader of men, yet at the same time acted out his own, strange inner perceptions, independent of the praise or blame of men? (5-6 M).

Bessie Head felt she was born into a world into which

are born both evil and good men. Both have to do justice to their cause. In this country there is a great tolerance of evil. It is because of death that we tolerate evil. All meet death in the end, and because of death we make allowance for evil though we do not like it (27 RC).

These evils were responsible for not only the threat of the personal and cultural destruction of the majority of South Africa's population, but also its frequent realization in physical violence, for example, in the massacres at Sharpeville and Langa. Rather than make allowances for it, however, Bessie Head translates this tangible evidence of the workings of power into the motifs of torture that permeate her work, in particular in *A Question of Power* through the slow deaths of the 'coloured' men and the threat that Elizabeth, too, will 'die like them' (45 QP). Out of this 'living death' she also attempts create a structure to support a 'living life', and her characters were also a part of this. For example, Makhaya, in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, seeks to escape oppression since only in isolation lies the possibility of



avoiding the complexities of power, saying he does not 'want a stake in any man's society' (135 RC).

However, because of the near-impossibility of existing outside society and its influences, Bessie Head also examines a number of possible defences and alternatives against these evils. One possibility she explored was whether personal power is a defence against the power of others or whether, as with many in *A Question of Power* 'insight into their own powers had driven them mad, and they had robbed themselves of the natural grandeur of life' (35). This frequently results in those with latent powers being prevented from fulfilling them, as for example when Sello suggests that Elizabeth was 'created with ten billion times more power than he [Dan]...You will never know your power. I will never let you see it because I know what power does' (199). What power does is to change people. Thus, Sello himself changes from a man admired and loved by villagers, an ordinary man, a cattle breeder and crop farmer, just 'anyone' (28), as Elizabeth herself longs to be, into someone she reveres as an almost universally adored God, such that 'Nothing fascinated her more than his interest in and affection for people' (23). However, he then changes further from Godlike to depraved:

in her case, there had been a beautiful introduction to this unbelievable nightmare. Where was the white-robed monk who had captured and riveted her attention with his question-and-answer approach to life? Here was a world, now, where there were no questions, only pre-planned overpowering statements that choked her, and an incredibly malicious man in a brown suit with a woman too shocking to comprehend (47).

So drastic is this change that Elizabeth now 'doubted he had ever been a God. He had looked then like a Caligula in little boots with thin stick legs' (42).

Bessie Head's feelings towards power were characteristically ambivalent. For example, she denies that power was the motivating force behind her characters actions: 'Now the great B. Head heroes are not driven by a lust for power. They are driven as the author wills but never, never a lust for power' (16.5.1980 KMM BHP). One of the difficulties Bessie Head had with issues of power was her awareness that any power she herself possessed might prove to be no more benign than that possessed by the 'power people' (19 QP). In a personal letter she says 'I am not exactly the Devil but I've tended to pass people on to him. I've been standing outside the gates of hell for some time, very vigorously pitching my foes into the fire' (26.1.1981 KMM BHP). She undoubtedly possessed a powerful aspect to her personality which she unleashed from time to time upon Serowe village life. For example, she once wrote a 'TERRIFIC letter' to someone in the village whose 'abnormalities arouse extreme horror' (24.2.1979 KMM BHP) and of whom she said 'I twice managed to rip [her] to pieces (I have written several letters like that to demons who came my way giving them a clear picture of their evils. They get so appalled that I never see them again'. The letter goes on to state:

'Now look at what you are like - is this what a human being should be? See yourself'...I have the talent to write letters clearly bringing demons face to face with themselves, what shocks them is no-one else does it to them. They set up such poses of class and power that they terrify people. No one takes them on except me and that is what really shocks you - that I have the guts to do the impossible (24.2.1979 KMM BHP).

In this letter, Bessie Head makes it clear that she recognises that a 'victim' can ultimately be as dangerous as the oppressor and this is an idea she expresses in *A Question of Power* :

Too often the feelings of a victim are not taken into account. He is so disregarded by the torturer or oppressor that for centuries evils are perpetrated with no one being aghast or put the shame. The tempo of it had been speeded up, brought breath-close and condensed to a high-pitched ferocity. It rumbled beneath her consciousness like molten lava. It only needed someone to bring the hot lava to the surface for her to find that a process of degradation, scorn and wild, blind cruelty had its equivalent of wild, savage vengeance in her (98 QP).

Although Bessie Head does not question the status of victim here, and describes him as male, the sense of suppressed power surging out in the metaphor of molten lava represents a leakage of her own power, full recognition of which would be as dangerous and threatening an experience as any lack of power. Thus, whilst Bessie Head felt powerless and helpless much of the time, she also felt that she herself could be evil and powerful, and that she needed to remain aware of this in order not to harm others. However, she also acknowledged her own power as a creator to personify all the elements involved in the power process, as well as the powerful side of her own personality which was a protection against the abuse of others:

I made Maru a personality of power and then stepped behind him and manipulated him. I was trying to reply to those obscene shouts with dignity and quietly took a step down the social ladder. The stylized beauty of Maru was one struggling to retain human dignity against those shouts...the shouts of dog, filth, dog filth, you are a coloured dog (20.6.1980 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head is clearly aware of the shifts and dangers of a power which is not a thing, a possession, but may be, as Freire (1985) suggests, dialectical rather than simply repressive. As such it

works both on and through people. On the one hand, this means that domination is never so complete that power is experienced exclusively as a negative force. On the other hand, it means that power is at the basis of all forms of behavior in which people resist, struggle, and fight for their image of a better world (Giroux 1985, xix).

Thus she attempts to discover what qualities are necessary to transform evil and malevolent powers into powers that will work for good rather than evil. Among the possibilities that are available is innocence. In *When Rain Clouds Gather* Dinorego and Gilbert share a similar background that contained innocence, trust and respect and a lack of understanding of evil. However, this barely protects them against the evils of, for example, Matenge. Here, as elsewhere in Bessie Head's work innocence appears to be no protection since 'Few resisted the evil and these few were swiftly eliminated, perhaps through their innocence of evil' (19 TTP). Simplicity is another possible protection and one that Makhaya, for example, seeks. While he has a city slum background, acquainting him with 'rape, murder and bloodshed' and a horror of life (97 RC) he 'wanted a few simple answers on how to live well and sanely. He wanted to undo the complexity of hatred and humiliation that had dominated his life for so long' (71 RC). Makhaya also believes that the many evils he has seen in his lifetime 'were created by poverty and oppression' (15 RC) and he seeks a way to live that will free him from the evils of their effects.

One of the most powerful defences against evil in Bessie Head's work, despite its often dangerous co-existence with evil itself, is goodness. By creating a sense of absolute goodness in many of her characters, Bessie Head provided herself with a survival strategy by aligning herself with forces for good which enabled her to counter the 'darkness of the soul' (85 QP) which troubles Elizabeth. The good characters in Bessie Head's work, and the good aspects of her characters personify the means to combat the evils of the world. One source of

such goodness is the heart, which leads an individual to the pursuit of meaning in one's life, for example as in 'Heaven Is Not Closed' where Galethebege has a 'natural goodness of heart that made her so eagerly pursue the word of the Gospel' (8 CT). Dikeledi, in 'The Collector of Treasures', has a life that has 'become holy to her during all those years she had struggled to maintain herself and the children' (101 CT), though her life is ultimately lost to imprisonment. Birgette in *A Question of Power* is characterised by strength and by the 'stripped-down simplicity of her goodness, the split-second decisions on what was the most noble thing to do were like the proverbial straw flung at a drowning man' (85 QP). Such goodness, then, may have the power to save those in danger of losing their 'living life' to those that threaten the 'living death'. Thus, Kenosi, who works with Elizabeth in the garden is 'one of the miracles or accidents that saved her life' (89 QP). Goodness can compensate for evil, so that Elizabeth, when 'she brooded on the logic of goodness alone...seemed to think it justified suffering' (98 QP).

Freedom is another possible solution that might lead to protection from the power of others. Such freedom is the freedom to define one's own reality, and may be acquired in a number of ways. For example like Sello, Elizabeth values the 'kind of humility which made him free, within, totally unimportant, totally free from his own personal poisons' (11 QP) and from 'one's passions as the source of all evil' (12 QP). Such a desire also indicates freedom from the self, an image that is resonant in the 'stripping away of vesture garments' that recurs throughout the novel, an attempt to attain purity or even a state of

non-existence. This is the freedom to 'hunger after the things of the soul, in which other preoccupations were submerged' (11 QP). Freedom from the power of others can also be transformed into power over one's self. Bessie Head had a utopian dream that a massive power shift would eventually take place in which the poor will inherit the earth, which is, of course, a version of the Christian belief that the poor and suffering will be given the keys to the kingdom of Heaven. She exalts the poor, indicating her belief in their ultimate superiority. The glorification of suffering has always held out hope beyond this life for slave societies and for the poor in general. In *A Question of Power*, suffering 'gave people and nations a powerful voice for the future and a common meeting-ground' (31 QP) where they will 'awaken to a knowledge of their powers, but this time in a saner world' (35). This is evident in the often quoted pronouncement of *A Question of Power* where Elizabeth feels that she has 'fallen from the very beginning into the warm embrace of the brotherhood of man, because when people wanted everyone to be ordinary it was just another way of saying man loved man' (206). In order to attain any prize in this life, for instance Elizabeth's rosette which is 'symbolic of the brotherhood of man' (37), she must identify with the poor and humble. Indeed, she is forced to do so; she is told that 'This time you're going to really learn how' (31 QP). Those who parade before Elizabeth with 'sad, fire-washed faces' (31) are 'ordinary, sane people, seemingly their only distinction being that they had consciously concentrated on spiritual earnings'.

Against the extremes of innocence and guilt, power and powerlessness, and their personification into mythic, godlike, good or

evil figures, stands Bessie Head's core ideal of the 'ordinary person'. This is perhaps her most strategic defence against both the power of others and the dangers of personal power. Bessie Head's sense of acute difference, like that of many of her characters, and their isolation, has caused them to be more than, as Linda Susan Beard has described Elizabeth, 'somewhat set apart' (1979, 267). They are outsiders, highly visible and with an intense sense of inferiority. Because of this Bessie Head desperately wanted to be, like Elizabeth, just 'anyone'. One of the reasons for this is the hope that an ordinary person might attract no attention, which includes the destructive attention with its attendant threat of annihilation by the 'power people'. Makhaya, for example, felt he was 'just an ordinary man and he wanted to stay that way all his life' (171 RC). To be ordinary also meant, for Bessie Head, to identify with humankind rather than with a particular environment, race or sex:

There was a world apart from petty human hatreds and petty human social codes and values where the human soul roamed free in all its splendour and glory. No barriers of race or creed or tribe hindered its activities. He had seen majestic kings of the soul, walking in the ragged clothes of filthy beggars (67 M).

This would, of course, end her racial and sexual classification and mark the beginning of her acceptance as a human being. However, it is apparent that to be ordinary does not mean to be free from suffering. The suffering of ordinary people is seen as a learning process:

The basic suffering and learning turned me inwards and what I really say is my soul is like a jigsaw puzzle; one more piece is being put into place but my teachers this time have not been Jesus and Buddha but the ordinary man and woman in Africa (22.1.1972 KMM BHP).

The suffering of ordinary people subjected to overwhelming power processes which results in horrific atrocities is not something which Bessie Head ignores or sacrifices to idealism. She describes Elizabeth's identification with the persecuted Jews and with other prisoners of concentration camps, whose history she learned from a family of German Jews with whom she lived (46 QP). She feels she had 'gained an insight into what the German concentration camps must have been like' (200). Bessie Head felt a similar identification, saying 'the reality of Belsen, Dachau and Buchenwald were forced on me here' (26.3.1973 KMM BHP) and that 'The Book [*A Question of Power*] not only related to evils practised in South Africa but the Belsens and Dachau's [sic] of Hitler's time, more to Hitler than anything else' (7.9.1978 KMM BHP). Criticisms that could be levelled against her in the light of such comments are those which another writer who connected her own experience with that of concentration camp prisoners, Sylvia Plath, attracted. These included either trivializing the holocaust or aggrandizing her own experience, or as having no right to speak of something of which she had no direct experience (Rose 1992, 206). However, the effects of oppression and abuse in their different guises may result in extreme reactions that are not dissimilar to those experienced by survivors of the camps. Bettelheim (1961) explained that the concentration camps were designed to deny their victims individuality, and that the pent-up hostility the victims suffered against their oppressors exhausted them, rendered them incapable of resistance. When no resistance occurred, their persecution worsened. This can be seen to be analogous to what has happened in the



relationship between oppressors and oppressed, not least that of indigenous peoples under colonial oppression.

How can an ordinary person, one without supernatural powers, survive cruelty and oppression? To do so, their 'ordinariness' must be far removed from any conventional interpretation of the word. They need to possess their own kind of power, courage and integrity, and perhaps goodness and spirituality. Bessie Head's 'ordinariness' is infused with all these qualities, which bestow upon the possessor the ability to challenge the forces of evil, the tremendous strength required to survive it, or the courage to die trying. Seemingly ordinary people do this daily, whether the evils that beset them are the extreme ones encountered in concentration camps or the often unseen ones of child abuse, domestic violence, painful illness or spiritual and emotional injury from a complexity of causes. Their ordinariness can encompass goodness, purity, nobility, perfection, spirituality, courage, and those who possess such qualities carry with them the hope that their continuing existence in a world where their opposites also exist will make a difference. By incorporating these elements, along with religious and mythical influences and language to describe good and evil. Bessie Head also refined the bloody history of Southern Africa and the forces that shaped it and her own life into personifications of good and evil and expanded them into not only the universal but the cosmic. This was facilitated by the religious and supernatural aspects of both South Africa and Botswana and their connection to the socio-political milieux which she inhabited. They provided Bessie Head with an effective idiom with which to communicate a metaphoric approximation of the truth of her life. She felt that, in the world she inhabited 'no

one had come to terms with their own powers and at the same time made allowance for the powers of others' (35 QP). However, through her creation of good and evil characters she could, by proxy, elevate herself from a state of 'living death' to 'a living life'. While the religious and supernatural idiom Bessie Head adopted was one which has long been the only one available for many of those for whom becoming a free subject was only a dream, it was also a way in which she could relate herself to various aspects of the cultures of both South Africa and Botswana, since others around her in both countries to a lesser or greater degree also believed in the presence of supernatural powers, whether this was the God of the Afrikaners or the deities of Botswana. In this context Bessie Head did not experience the presence of beings who were culturally unreal. She was also open to what she saw as the flexibility of the universe, and to accept the many mysteries and unanswerable questions of life. As she said of Elizabeth 'It was almost a suppressed argument she was to work with all the time; that people, in their souls, were forces, energies, stars, planets, universes and all kinds of swirling magic and mystery' (35 QP).

Bessie Head's complex position amidst the power processes in which she was immersed, and her desire to establish a living life on her own terms, meant that she continually had to ask, as did Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* 'What sort of gymnast was she supposed to be, so overstrained between concepts of good and evil?' (109 QP). Exhausting though this may have been, it was through such constant questioning and activity, translated into her writing, that she was able to avoid the embodiment of 'living death', someone neither good nor evil but empty of

all humanity, existing instead in a state of zombiehood. She accepted, as did Elizabeth, both good and evil, and this enabled her to translate her suffering into meaning. Bessie Head's dual portrayal of power was a protection from its absolutes and allowed her a means of establishing her own power and control to enable her to see into and behind the forces that threatened her and to enable her to determine and define her own reality.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

'NO ILLNESS THAT ONE MIGHT NAME' (P. Smith 1972, *The Little Karroo*, 125)

*I saw that you did not even believe someone could suffer so much and that a horror could be so real. In fact, no one ever said on reading "Question of Power" -- "Oh, I can see what you have suffered..."*  
(18.11.1978 KMM BHP).

*We may liberate ourselves from alien oppressors, but when do we come alive to ourselves? (Where is the Hour of the Beautiful Birds Dancing in the Sun-Wind? The Cardinals, 152).*

In Patrick Colm Hogan's article 'Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*: A Lacanian Psychosis' he says:

In my experience, most readers of this novel - students, for example - find the general relations between madness and political repression to be relatively straightforward and comprehensible. They are baffled, however, by the delusory nightworld: the identity of Sello, Dan and Medusa; the reasons they act as they do; the principles which guide the development of the encompassing hallucinations. These, I think, are primarily psychological problems, not ethical or political ones. What Head is really presenting is a case of psychosis (1994, 96-97).

For Hogan, then, *A Question of Power* 'explores the psychotic delusions of a colored woman from South Africa' (110). His views raise two important and closely linked assumptions: the first is that it is possible to separate ethical, political and psychological problems, and the second is that an individual who attempts to express the inexpressible runs the inevitable risk of being diagnosed as delusional or psychotic. In this chapter I intend to challenge both beliefs on the grounds that they reinforce the 'living death' already imposed upon Bessie Head and thus threaten to undermine the 'living life' that was also the expression of her lived reality. In labelling Elizabeth 'a coloured woman from South Africa', Hogan unwittingly indicates how inextricably the political and ethical were a part of Bessie Head's

life. In further labelling her 'delusional', he dismisses her attempt to convey the 'living death' of her experience in the way she found most effective. For any of us the ability to translate our reality into words is at best a difficult task, a poor approximation of reality. As Sass points out

The mere fact of being oriented toward private inner sensations or toward focusing on unique particulars is likely to make one aware of an inexpressible specificity that is actually present in all human experience... (1992, 187).

It is our inability to express the inexpressible that leads us of necessity to adopt shorthand terms in the form of specific terminology to describe, for example, extreme distress. However, many such descriptors carry with them the danger that the suffering of individuals or groups ceases to be recognized as terrifying and painful. Instead, they are transformed into objects of study, of theoretical argument. Thus, Bessie Head, with all her complexity, her vitality and her talent becomes no more than a delusional coloured woman. While it might be argued that she was also this, any argument that does not acknowledge her many dimensions carries within it the seeds of such reductionism. I also want to challenge certain critics' views and interpretations of madness in Bessie Head's life and work, and to suggest that their theories, diagnoses, labelling and classification, whether of the writer or of her characters, diminish its meaning and social intelligibility. Among those I will use to support my argument is R.D. Laing, who, as I have already pointed out, was admired and respected by Bessie Head, perhaps because of his humanism and his emphasis on the social intelligibility of madness. Despite my antipathy to certain terms, I

have chosen to use the word 'madness' to refer to Bessie Head's experience. I do not intend to put the word in scare quotes, but rather state my intention to use it in the way that Roger Poole describes in his excellent book *The Unknown Virginia Woolf*. He says that

From time to time, readers of good will have observed that, although I refuse the word 'mad', I never say what I think the proper term should be. I would like to suggest, therefore, that it is not so much a question of what the word itself means, as a question of the intentionality with which the word is uttered. It is not a matter of the 'what' but of the 'how'...If the word 'mad' is used in a disabling, disconfirming way, instinct with Foucaultian power-intentions, then the word itself is a false and distorting label. If however the word is used in an empathetic, reconstitutive, even loving manner, then it may pass muster temporarily as a word we use for want of a better one (1982, xi-xii).

Bessie Head herself frequently used the terms madness, insanity, breakdown, about her experience, thus labelling her own behaviour as abnormal. In doing so, she showed the extent to which she had internalized and adopted the beliefs and terms used by others to describe behaviour that departs from the dominant view of what is seen to be normal. They were also terms that had been used in regard to her mother, and because of her close identification with her it was not unusual that she should readily adopt them and incorporate them into her own self-concept. She was also, however, entitled to use whatever terminology she chose to apply to herself in order to describe and attempt to understand her experience, since she was aware that she was always more than mere labels. Bessie Head outlines some of her feelings in this regard in a letter to a student who had included her work in a dissertation. She said:

The only two words I have objection to in the thesis are neurotic and madness. The woman who stands by the kitchen sink and laughs so richly and superbly while Tom washes, is no neurotic; the vigorous vegetable gardener is no neurotic, the vigorous author of *A Question of Power* is no inward-turning neurotic. Secondly,

*Question* split readers and reviewers into two camps. The first camp said: This is a magnificent account of insanity. The second camp said: Because of the book's essential wisdom, it is a pity she does not have control over the experience. The second camp is nearer the truth. The truth is that I could see so far and no further (27.7.1983 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head's objections to the terms used are based on the negative freight they carry, and the way they have become part of a derogatory and reductive framework which is damaging to the individual concerned. While she makes clear her awareness that her broad horizon view had narrowed down, that the 'living death' had caused her view to be obscured, she does not indicate that this constriction of vision is a permanent one. That it was temporary, albeit recurrent, is indicated by her ability to continue to write, as well as the quality of her descriptions of the humour and richness that characterized her life and that of Elizabeth. Nevertheless, the interiority that characterizes Bessie Head's work, the nature and content of *A Question of Power* in particular, and her own acknowledgement that the novel is autobiographical and rooted in her own breakdown, has inevitably led to a critical focus on this particular aspect of Bessie Head's life and work. Added to this is the widespread knowledge that her mother had been hospitalized in the Fort Napier mental institution in Pietermaritzburg following a diagnosis of dementia praecox. A number of Bessie Head's critics, therefore, feel it necessary to diagnose not only her but also her characters.

The most overtly diagnostic critique of Bessie Head's work claims that

Elizabeth, the center of consciousness in *A Question of Power*, meets the criteria set forth in the *Desk Reference to the Diagnostic Criteria from Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of*

*Mental Disorders*, third edition (DSM-III, 1982) for paranoid schizophrenia (Evasdaughter 1989, 72).

Elizabeth's condition is medicalized on the basis that she has bizarre delusions, auditory and other hallucinations, illogical thinking and deterioration of her level of functioning which result in a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia. Evasdaughter goes on to say that 'While an author cannot be diagnosed from a literary text, a character can be' (72), although she does not go on to state what purpose either the diagnosis of a literary character or of its author might serve. She gives the cause of Elizabeth's breakdown as 'partly culture shock and partly hostility among the Batswana toward half-breeds' (73). While the term 'half-breed' is used by Bessie Head to describe Elizabeth, it can hardly be seen as an appropriate term for a critic to use. Other critics continue in this vein, for example, Linda Susan Beard (1979) in her article 'Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*: The Journey through Disintegration to Wholeness' sees *A Question of Power* as the 'anatomy of a nervous breakdown' (268). Joanne Chase (1982) describes it as a 'portrait of an insane woman' (67) in which 'Literally, Elizabeth is a South African half-breed female exile' (67) whose 'delusion is internally coherent, and yet totally irrational' (70). Ignoring Elizabeth's personal history, which is given quite clearly within the novel, this critic states that 'there is nothing revealed about her life in Motabeng Village which could engender such an extreme reaction' (70), and she feels that the 'book's theoretical framework is far fetched to say the least' (74).



Susan Gardner in her biographical memoir 'Don't Ask for the True Story' (1986) medicalizes Bessie Head's 'extraordinarily erratic behaviour' (124). She refers to documents from the Pretoria Mental Hospital where Bessie Head's mother was a patient some years prior to her admission to the Fort Napier Institution, on which the deputy physician had written 'she suffers from Presenile Psychosis' (124). Gardner's own diagnosis of Bessie Head's condition is linked to what she calls her mother's '"progressive brain disease"' (124). Patrick Colm Hogan concerns himself with a Lacanian interpretation in which the castration complex figures largely in Elizabeth's 'delusions', since she is 'nameless and outside of, excluded by, the Symbolic Order and its Law' (1994, 103). He goes on to say that Elizabeth's mother, too, is excluded from the Symbolic Order because of her relationship with a black African. Thus Elizabeth's own relationship to the Symbolic Order disintegrates along with 'the correlated fragmentation of her constitutionally unstable ego' (103). Helen Cooper says that Bessie Head transforms the psychic violence of her colonial birth history into a 'political narrative of her family romance' (1994, 75).

In writing about a woman understandably sensitive to the labelling of others, it is surprising that all of these critics participate unquestioningly in the labelling and/or diagnostic process in relation to Bessie Head and her work. I want to turn now to an examination of some of the terms used, and their implications for Bessie Head. Evasdaughter (1989) has diagnosed Elizabeth, in *A Question of Power*, as schizophrenic. This is the term most frequently perceived as synonymous with madness, and was coined by Eugene Bleuler in 1908. It superceded

that of dementia praecox, a term originally used by Emile Kraepelin in 1896 to describe the 'peculiar destruction of the inner cohesiveness of the psychic personality with predominant damage to the emotional life and the will' (Sass 1992, 13-14). Diagnosis is generally made with reference to the aforementioned Diagnostical and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV (1994), where a number of symptoms, noted over a particular period of time, result in diagnosis. Some of the major signs and symptoms of schizophrenia

pertains to certain apparent distortions in the patient's judgements concerning the consensual world, known as 'poor reality testing'; the second, often termed 'loss of ego boundaries', refers to the loss or attenuation of the basic sense of separateness of the world; the third involves delusions or hallucinations of what is called 'world catastrophe' or 'world destruction' (Sass 1992, 269).

The causes of any form of intrapsychic conflict is open to interpretation in a number of ways. For example, the Freudian model emphasizes repression, which produces schizoid personalities due to the child's frustrated emotional needs. Views surrounding childhood as the source of later distress were not unfamiliar to Bessie Head, but she was adamant they did not apply to her, saying 'No, my childhood did not drive me mad. It was something else I battled with' (23.8.1974 KMM BHP). In this model such individuals are deemed unable to enter into emotional involvement with others in later life. Instead, they are seen to attempt to provide meaning through creativity. The link between madness and creativity, prevalent during the Romantic period, linked the heightened sensitivity of intensely creative individuals with depression and madness, a view that persists. Susan Sontag suggests that 'In the twentieth century, the repellent, harrowing disease that is made the

index of a superior sensitivity, the vehicle of "spiritual" feelings and "critical" discontent, is insanity' (1979, 35).

Opposed to the Romantic model is the view of madness as disease, in which it is seen as a reaction to neurological or physiological abnormalities of various kinds. The body is seen as a malfunctioning machine, and the language used to describe the condition is that of defects and failure whether there is a demonstrable physiological or genetic basis for the condition or not (Sass 1992 3). One of the attractions of the medical model is that it absolves those surrounding the sufferer from the blame that can be seen to arise from more humanistic views, and an organization that clearly promulgates such a model is The Schizophrenia Association of Great Britain. This is a registered charity founded in 1970 which make it clear that they believe mental illnesses are physical illnesses in which the chemistry of the body, including the brain, is altered by the disease process. Gwynneth Hemmings, of the Society, is forthright, albeit in my opinion mistaken, in her views:

I believe schizophrenia to be wholly a genetically inherited disease, which is biochemically mediated. If environment is to be implicated it should be done in terms of diet, infection and exhaustion, but never should the disease be interpreted in psychological terms. Schizophrenia is not caused by Mother, Father, Husband, Wife, family or society. It is wholly a disease (The Psychological Aspects of Schizophrenia SAGB).

Any organic or biochemical basis of mental illness remains harder to establish than in physical illness, and the relationship between chemical changes and environmental stressors is still unclear. While schizophrenia is undoubtedly a complex condition in which genetic determinants may well play a part, the rigidity and narrowness of

Hemmings' view precludes any possibility of sociopolitical and environmental causes; nor does it take into account the effects and implications of possible misdiagnosis. The latest attraction of the medical view in Britain may in part reflect the 'care in the community' approach which relies on families as carers and thus cannot afford to alienate them, highlighting the political aspects of the medical model. Thus, while accurate diagnosis can be a useful and often necessary aid in alleviating extreme distress, it can also reinforce and perpetuate stereotypes, which serve other social functions. There are a number of negative labels, of which madness is but one, which can be ascribed to discrete groups of people for this reason. Since social norms are established within groups to ensure the physical and psychological security of both individuals and the groups themselves, those whose behaviour or perhaps even their very existence is perceived as a threat to the group's existence, can be labelled in a variety of ways as deviant. Foucault (1967) shows, in *Madness and Civilization* (1967), how society projects its anxieties and preconceptions into theoretical systems which justify the confinement of whatever social group or individual appears to threaten its survival. He describes the exclusion and confinement of lepers, their image as dangerous, wicked, and punished by God as well as bodily reminders of his power and of the Christian duty of charity, and how this was transferred to those designated mad after leprosy waned and the leper houses closed. The stigma that was imposed upon lepers can also be imposed upon any group of unapproved racial, national and religious affiliations. It has also been imposed upon women in many different ways. Such groups can also be created in the absence of such distinguishing features as skin

pigmentation or gender classification, as in the instance of the 'untouchables' of India, probably one of the most oppressed groups of people that have existed. Foucault (1967) reminds us that the insane are the lepers of today and indeed so powerful is the stigma attached to mental illness that those labelled 'mentally ill' are dealt with guardedly even by their carers lest their malady prove either genetic or catching. An example of this in Bessie Head's work appears in *A Question of Power* where it is prophesied that Elizabeth will one day become mad, since she will have inevitably inherited her mother's madness.

Mechanistic beliefs have always stood in opposition to those of individuals working in the psychotherapeutic professions who have appreciated their limitations and dangers. Winnicott, for example, believed that

It is sometimes assumed that in health the individual is always integrated, as well as living in his own body, and able to feel that the world is real...[yet every person has the capacity] to become unintegrated, depersonalized, and to feel that the world is unreal (Winnicott 1958, 150).

This view indicates that we all have the potential to exhibit what might be seen as mental ill health at some time, and it is clear, then, that some forms of mental illness prevail as such because they are seen as abnormal experiences by those who refuse to accept that they have any place in society. The issue of healthy mental functioning among people of colour in white-dominated societies has itself long been one of contention and racism undoubtedly plays a major part in the diagnosis of madness in people of colour. Most psychiatrists and psychologists in South Africa, as in Europe and America, are white. According to a WHO

report published in 1977 there were at that time no black psychiatrists at all in South Africa (Littlewood & Lipsedge 1989, 56). Treating black patients within a Eurocentric frame of reference is problematic since any 'symptoms' they exhibit may be an expression of their basic reality and a reflection of their experiences although they themselves may not be allowed to put such a construction on their condition. Studies of black Americans have shown that over 80% of those experiencing psychological distress attribute their problems to something about themselves rather than their circumstances:

This tendency to interpret social ills as psychologically derived creates a psychological subject who is given the full burden of responsibility for correcting his or her troubles. In this matter, underlying structures that systematically thwart a group's opportunities (such as economic structures that breed racism and sexism) are reproduced in so far as we view the troubles of people to be a problem of their will power, motivation, intellect or personality dynamics (Sampson, 5-6).

According to Littlewood and Lipsedge 'Disadvantaged and minority groups in a variety of countries in the world have high rates of schizophrenia' (265). It is noteworthy that after the National Party came to power in South Africa in 1948 'the suicide rate doubled among black Africans' (Littlewood & Lipsedge 1989, 56). In Britain, schizophrenia is most commonly diagnosed among the black population who are ascribed an inferior identity and subjected to continuing prejudice, high levels of unemployment, poorer access to housing, welfare and care facilities. The treatment of those diagnosed may be equally suspect. In 1977 it was reported that in South Africa there were 10,000 involuntary black patients held in private, profit making institutions contracted by the government and advised by an Army Medical corps brigadier. They were kept in degrading and overcrowded conditions, had no full time doctor,

and their treatment consisted 'solely of drugs'. Moreover, the 'patients' labour was subcontracted to other companies' (57).

That a variety of factors could bring about altered responses in an individual was perhaps most clearly recognized by the radical psychiatrist of the 1960s, R. D. Laing, who said that

The 'ego' is the instrument for living in *this* world. If the 'ego' is broken up or destroyed (by the insurmountable contradictions of certain life situations, by toxins, chemical changes etc) then the person may be exposed to other worlds, 'real' in different ways from the more familiar territory of dreams, imagination, perception or phantasy (Laing 1970, 114-5).

In Laing's theories, madness was

simply the sudden removal of the veil of the false self, which had been serving to maintain an outer behavioural normality that may, long ago, have failed to be any reflection of the state of the affairs in the secret self (1975, 99-100).

As I have pointed out, Bessie Head also used similar language to that of Laing and of his subjects to describe her own desire to be free from what she saw as 'personal poisons' in the form of pride, arrogance, ego (11 QP). In the context of both her own experience and of Laing's statement, her view of these elements of herself as 'personal poisons' can be seen as toxic by-products of an oppressive society which imposes all its own negative aspects upon those it wishes to exclude. The interactive relationship between individuals and societies, and the extreme distress many individuals experience as a result, is exemplified in Laing and his colleague David Cooper's belief that 'people do not go mad but are driven mad by others who are driven into the position of driving them mad by a peculiar convergence of social pressures' (1967, viii ). The dominant group in such a society will deny they are responsible for the distress of others, opting instead for a perspective

that defends and perpetuates their own position and view. Cooper stated that 'others are elected to live out the chaos that we refuse to confront in ourselves' (viii). Bessie Head also recognized this, saying:

It is preferable to have the kind of insecurity about life and death that is universal to man: *I am sure of so little*. It is despicable to have this same sense of insecurity - especially about a white skin - defended by power and guns (142 TTP).

Such underlying insecurities, whether collective or individual involve, in Laing's view, the creation of what he called a false self as a protective measure. However, he believed that such a creation can also 'perpetuate the anxieties it is in some measure a defence against and it may provide the starting position for a line of development that ends in psychosis' (1975, 65). Although Laing used the term psychosis, he never used it in a dehumanizing way. Indeed, he felt it was an ultimately healing and consciousness-raising experience rather than a destructive one, and his theories provide a useful framework within which to examine Bessie Head's madness as both the 'living life' and the 'living death', as both her suffering and her rejection of her suffering in the context of Laing's statement that 'Madness need not be all breakdown. It may also be break-through. It is potentially liberation and renewal as well as enslavement and existential death' (1970, 110). In the work of Laing and Cooper, then, madness is a strategy for autonomizing change, and as such, it is perhaps the only vehicle for the expression of what they described as the 'true self' (Cooper 1980 52). Others, too, have interpreted madness as 'self-confrontation, as the extreme form of identity crisis which subsequently brings about radical



changes in the affected person's perception of himself [sic] and the world around him' (Keitel 1989, 3).

The view of Laing and others that madness is both political and liberating is the opposite to that of a medical model, and has not been without criticism, particularly by some feminists who see it as being of little or no practical help for women experiencing extreme distress.

Phyllis Chesler, for example, has pointed out that

Most weeping, depressed women, most anxious and terrified women are not about to seize the means of production and reproduction, nor are they any more creatively involved with problems of cosmic powerlessness, evil and love than is the rest of the human race (1974, xxi).

As Bessie Head's work shows, however, she was intensely involved with problems of cosmic powerlessness, evil and love and felt them to be relevant to her lived reality. Like many others, she also found their idiom useful in articulating her personal feelings and dilemmas. Chesler goes on to state that Laing does not understand the 'universal and objective oppression of women and of its particular relation to madness in women' (87). In her view, he fails to address issues of sexuality and the distribution of power between men and women in his work. Laing (1990) acknowledged his omissions, and was working on a contribution to this discussion shortly before his death. However, his importance lies in his acknowledgement of the relevance of the complex workings of power within society, its involvement in altered states of consciousness and its effects upon individuals, which opened the way for the later analysis of power of, for example, Michel Foucault.

Despite her criticism of Laing, Chesler takes cognizance of the fact that in his studies all of the dysfunctional families were involved in

(1) the sexual and intellectual repression of their daughters; (2) covert and overt patterns of paternal tyranny and incest; (3) the deep division between mother and daughter, which is characterized, on the mother's part, by an obsessive 'policing' coupled with a lack of physical affection for her daughter, and on both mother's and daughter's parts, by a preference for the father-husband, and a sacrificing of each other for family stability or for temporary feelings of well-being (1974, 87).

All of these elements have a social aspect, as does Chesler's observations that

It may be argued that what exists in most families exists in an *extreme* form in the schizophrenogenic one...It may also be argued that perhaps the mothers are as 'hospitalised' within their marriages as their daughters are within the asylums (1974, 89-90).

In Laing's view, families are seen as microcosms of societal repression, however, individuals can also be hospitalized, both metaphorically and literally, within societies. Thus, Laing remains important for his insights that the causes of madness do not lie solely within the individual. In this context, women, whether confined within familial and domestic roles, experiencing conflict over their sexuality or their treatment as 'perpetual minors' (Qunta 1987, 80), and/or their brutalization by oppressive individuals or systems, may translate their responses, as Showalter (1991) points out, into illness, depression, and withdrawal rather than rebellion or action.

These extremes however need not necessarily be mutually exclusive, and nowhere is this more evident than in the work of those women writers for whom madness or psychic unease figures largely in either their life or their work. There are many striking examples of women writers from a

wide variety of cultural backgrounds who have turned their experiences of varying degrees of distress into works of art and Bessie Head shares some of her preoccupations with a number of them. Even white South African women writing earlier this century, who display obvious differences in both their lives and work, also have points of contact with Bessie Head. Olive Schreiner, for example, was treated by the neurologist Horatio Bryan Donkin for her '"nerve storms, asthma attacks and recurring breakdowns"', which he felt were caused by 'her efforts to stifle and deny her sexual desires' (Showalter 1991, 131). Some critics have moved little further forward than this in their analyses of Bessie Head's work. For example, Huma Ibrahim (1996) criticizes those who see the sexual aspect of Bessie Head's work as generated by what they perceive as her sexual problems, stating that 'Traditionally and historically "mad" men and women have always been believed to have a deviant sexuality' (124). However, instead of arguing against this obvious misrepresentation, she goes on to say that 'Insane women were often thought to be nymphomaniacs. This idea is exemplified by Head's exile, the madwoman and mother Elizabeth' (124). She says that Elizabeth's 'insanity emerges out of a rejection of one aspect of her identity - her sexual self' (148). Thus, Ibrahim actually accepts and propogates the dominant view. Rather than looking at Elizabeth as a person of many aspects, she emphasizes the sexual and reduces her to two categories, those of 'madwoman and mother'.

Another woman who was strikingly different from Bessie Head was Sarah Gertrude Millin, a white racist writer who achieved popularity in South Africa in the 1920s and 1930s. Millin was, however, from a Jewish immigrant background, and thus experienced her own kind of racial

marginality as well as her marginality as a woman. In Millin's work the identity of a character is synonymous with their outward appearance, and is linked with madness or psychic unease in some form. Thus Lindsell, in *God's Stepchildren*, for example, is not only physically unattractive but also has a horror of death and dissolution, whilst his wife is portrayed as completely lacking in spiritual or economic energy (1924, 26). The eponymous Mary Glenn has an unhealthy and obsessive love for her son, whilst one of the *Sons of Mrs Aab* is described as a 'mongol idiot' (Rubin 1977, 137) who deteriorates mentally, resulting in his mother eventually shooting both him and herself. Millin's work exemplifies how the reflection of the patriarchal view of women is absorbed by a white woman and reflected back upon people of colour. Her writing expresses a fear which spreads out from her own view of herself, links her psyche with her body image and her sexuality with what she both perceives and constructs as monstrous in others. This is further linked to sexuality via her obsession with 'spinsterhood' (Rubin 1977, 36) which also runs throughout her work. Millin feared, during her youth, that she would 'remain a spinster' (36) having seen herself since adolescence as 'reprehensibly unattractive' (30). Her work shows a preoccupation with a fear of Otherness, of blackness, ugliness, deformity. Indeed, according to her biographer, she 'always had a horror of the mentally ill or retarded' (137). Ugliness, blackness, represent for Millin a taint and a curse, linking ugliness with racial Otherness, with evil as well as moral culpability.

Pauline Smith, the South African writer of Scottish descent writing in the 1920s described the psychic distress experienced by many of her

characters as 'no illness that one might name' (1972, 125). Her characters live out their lives in a landscape that resembles not only a vast prison where they are confined behind a 'jagged bar of steel' (1976, 5) but also the confinement of a mental institution. Contemporary writers from Southern Africa, too, frequently use madness as their choice of subject matter. For example, the Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga in her novel *Nervous Conditions* (1988), describes entrapment, rebellion and escape in the Colonial Rhodesia of the 1960s, and the burdens and stresses of living in such an environment which include the breakdown of one of the characters, Nyasha. The Afrikaans writer Wilma Stockenstrom, in her novel *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree* (1983) uses hallucinatory prose to create an oppressive atmosphere characteristic of psychopathography to question the source of the 'melancholy that sometimes attacked me' (29). It is more madness than melancholy however that permeates a book that is deeply disturbing in its imagery and rhetoric. For all these writers, madness is portrayed as breakdown, as enslavement, as existential death, but perhaps the view which most explicitly corresponds with the 'living death' of madness which Bessie Head both experienced and wrote about, is that of the Dominican-born writer Jean Rhys. In her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, she describes it in terms of a zombie since 'A zombi is a dead person who seems to be alive or a living person who is dead' (Rhys 1997, 67). Carole Angier, Rhys's biographer, says that the horrifying image of a live body containing a dead soul is 'a precise picture of Jean Rhys's idea of madness...a person who has not yet suffered "the death people know about, "but who has suffered the real death, perhaps more than once' (Angier 1992, 545). Rhys clearly articulates madness, or

emotional death, as the real death, while physical death is a liberation (546).

The 'living death' of madness that Bessie Head experienced was undoubtedly terrifying, and one she experienced many times and expressed in different ways in the three novels that Craig MacKenzie suggested 'constitute a trilogy of sorts' (1993, 111). His view concurs with Bessie Head's own, which was that:

Three novels have a very tight cohesion - When Rain Clouds Gather, Maru and A Question of Power. They are autobiographical material. I had certain stresses in my life and answered them through these books (6.6.1984 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head was very clear about the origins of such stresses, and of their impact upon her, saying 'One would go stark, raving mad if a deep and endless endurance of suffering, such as one could encounter in Southern Africa, were really brought to the surface' (83 QP).

I want now to examine Bessie Head's madness and its translation into her writings as attempts to articulate her experience in the light of her personal and historical circumstances and as a method of communicating its personal meaning to others in the most effective way she knew how. Bessie Head's writings then become an intelligible response to the painful and distressing elements of her lived reality in an environment dominated by oppression and fear. They set out her understanding of the nature of the power relations operating both in her environment and within her being, as well as her attempts to transcend them. In these contexts, then, madness becomes expressive of both the 'living life' and the 'living death'. If we include Bessie Head's

posthumously published novel *The Cardinals*, her novels read chronologically as a quartet rather than a trilogy, which chart madness as an important part of both the 'living life' and the 'living death'. Although Bessie Head gives the protracted period of her breakdown as occurring predominantly during the years 1968 to 1972, it is unlikely that these years marked any new or dramatically different phase of her reality. Rather they saw a revisiting and intensification of long-standing difficulties that also appeared to continue long beyond this specified period.

Her first novel, *The Cardinals*, was written before Bessie Head left South Africa, and in it Mouse embodies a sense of powerlessness which is diagnosed by other characters as madness. According to Johnny, for example, Mouse is 'a freak. There's something very wrong with her' (22 C). He diagnoses her as being 'a perfect example of insanity' (27 C). Other characters in the novel reinforce this view. For example, PK suggests to Johnny that 'Mouse is a psychocase...she gets me all jittery. If you get yourself mixed up with her, the consequences might be terrible' (67 C). Mouse never comments upon her position herself, since she is Bessie Head's most silent and passive character who 'never says a word' (27 C), perhaps because of the inadequacy of conventional language to convey her experiences. Because of this, Johnny describes her as 'completely dead. Even an illiterate, inarticulate person can find some way of communicating' (27 C), but he feels Mouse is unable to communicate because 'She has cut off all the normal approaches. Between her and the rest of the world is a gigantic wilderness full of little side paths that lead nowhere' (30 C). Such an extreme inability to

communicate is indicative of the 'living death' which can be both a response to and the result of oppression. Yet it is apparent that the 'living life' also exists beneath Mouse's frozen silence, as Johnny recognizes: 'You pretend to walk around like an iceberg when all the time you're a powder-keg underneath. One day I'm going to reach the powder-keg and blow you to bits' (21 C). Johnny's intervention is hardly likely to be needed however; as he remarks: 'If she goes on like this much longer there's bound to be an explosion' (29 C). The metaphor of explosions recurs throughout Bessie Head's writings, and is particularly pertinent for she and for many others in her position, whose lives involved the continual experience of unremitting oppression but who nevertheless continue to survive. Fanon wrote of them that 'The explosion will not happen today. It is too soon...or too late' (Fanon 1973, 7) but for Bessie Head its promise runs like a slow burning fuse from *The Cardinals*, gathering momentum as Mouse is transformed into other characters who become progressively more able to tell their own story as they move throughout her later novels towards its ignition in *A Question of Power*. The explosion that occurs there, in a Laingian interpretation, expresses the breakthrough of the real self, or in Bessie Head's terms, the 'living life'.

*When Rain Clouds Gather*, the first novel Bessie Head published whilst in Botswana, incorporated not only factual information about the country but also, encrypted within it, personal events in her life and her responses to them. Bessie Head had gone to Botswana to take up employment as a primary school teacher at the Tshekedi Khama Memorial



School, but this soon ended because of the difficulties she experienced there. She described her experiences thus:

There is a man here, the principal of our school - he sort of thought he could get started to sleep with me - just like a frenzied itch but as a woman I mean nothing - when he couldn't get rid of the itch he just turned on me - right to the point of manhandling me in front of the kids and twisting my arm. I had to bite his hand to let him let go. This happened Monday 25/10/65. I fled away from the school, screaming. He went and called the police - that I had gone out of my mind. They came to my home and took me to the charge office (quoted in Vigne 1991, 10).

The key phrase in this passage is 'but as a woman I mean nothing' in which Bessie Head indicates her sensitivity to her negation by others, as well as the importance of gender in this negation. She resigned from the job saying they 'wanted me to get myself certified sane/insane' (12), indicating that her behaviour was now identified as abnormal by others and labelled as such, but that she refused to accept this.

Bessie Head's disturbances did not diminish, and in November 1965 she wrote:

Apart from the principal and his lecherous designs, one of the V.I.P.s of the 'royal' family got big eyes for me too. Not much to the liking of his female. There was talk of doing me in last year, she said so, so he cooled off making eyes at me. But I have been watched day and night. And still am - now more than ever (14).

The three main elements in this statement which are familiar aspects of Bessie Head's work as a whole are the introduction of prominent Botswana figures, the strong sexual component and surveillance by others. These can certainly be construed as elements of psychosis, of disease, of problems with aspects of Bessie Head's sense of identity, of delusions. They are, however, also intelligible in terms of Bessie Head's lived reality in their focus on powerful figures who personify the forces operating upon her, on her sexual status as a woman of colour and the

linked paradox of her high visibility and simultaneous invisibility. Considerable environmental stressors were also evident in her life, for example, her employment pattern was sporadic and insecure and she had a small child dependent upon her. She undertook work as what she called an 'odd job man' at the Bamangwato Development Association at Radisele near Serowe (28), where she felt 'disastrously cut off' for the four months she worked there (29). It was this development farm, started by Tshekedi Khama and Guy Clutton Brock as a community project, that forms the basis of a large part of *When Rain Clouds Gather*. During the summer of 1966 she was homeless and jobless in Palapye, before getting a job as a typist for the construction company building the road from Palapye to Serowe. When this, too, came to an end, she left for the refugee camp in Francistown. There, she incorporated many of her experiences in both the external and her inner world into *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Returning to Serowe in 1969, she was able to build a small house, also called 'Rain Clouds' with the profits from the novel (20.6.1980 KMM BHP).

In *When Rain Clouds Gather* Makhaya, escaping from the prison of South Africa across the border into Botswana, can be read as Mouse transformed, galvanized into escape and vocalization. The characters in this novel, however, continue to diagnose the madness of others. For example, when Makhaya refuses the offer of sexual favours from a child but still gives her money, he is pronounced mad by the old woman who says 'I knew it all along in my heart that he was mad! Let us lock the door to protect ourselves from the madman!' (15 RC). In this novel Makhaya also diagnoses himself, telling himself that he is 'going crazy'

door to protect ourselves from the madman!' 15 RC). In this novel Makhaya also diagnoses himself, telling himself that he is 'going crazy' (11 RC) while the author emphasises how his external air of 'calm, lonely self-containment' belies the jumble of chaotic discord that he contains within (7 RC). In this novel the levels of anger and violence generated by attempting to live in an unlivable situation are once again expressed in the frequent metaphors of explosion. Bessie Head indicates her own desire to blast her way out of the imprisoning categorization of others and acknowledges her right to her own reality and to move forward on her own terms. Though she, like Makhaka, might not have the power to change things, he nevertheless has had the plans to blow things up in his pocket all along although within this novel, however, there is no immediate prospect of him putting them into action. Indeed,

It was like self-mockery, this splattering rock and earth, to realize that he was indeed powerless to change an evil and that there were millions and millions of men built differently from him who enjoyed inflicting misery and degradation on a helpless and enslaved people (137 RC).

In *When Rain Clouds Gather* Makhaya remains able to function in the world, and does not experience any break with the consensus view of what reality is, although he embodies all the negating effects of apartheid society which are evident in his physical insubstantiality. He is also able to articulate explicitly his desire to create a 'living life' instead of accepting the 'living death' an individual can be born into. However, by the time Bessie Head wrote *Maru*, her second novel published whilst she was living in Botswana, the disturbances experienced by her characters had begun to take on a more terrifying

form, mirroring her own increasingly frightening personal experiences. Margaret Cadmore, for example, thinks that she has killed a small girl in her class who was laughing: 'I clearly saw myself grab her and break her neck with a stick' (47 M), while 'The victims...[of Maru's love] displayed alarming symptoms. The strongest fled as though they had seen a nameless terror. The weakest went insane, and walked about the village muttering to themselves' (35). In *Maru*, explosions continue to occur, for example 'Three bombs went off in Dilepe village, one after the other. First, Pete the principle fled. Then Seth the education supervisor fled. Then Morafi...' (92 M). Bessie Head describes her experiences in a letter and relates them to the novel:

...all the wrong things were happening. Half of it was one man, then another man and weird versions of love in the air, accompanied by abnormal sights. MARU gives a good insight into the situation...I am only crying about the people who got hurt because it was not so bad when I kept silent, but once I started speaking I said both vile and violent things because I could not endure any more torture. It is what I said that so sickens me. You know, very few people understand deep horror, fanatical possessiveness, the extremes of emotions, a kind of battle where evil is used to outwit the enemy, or if not outwit -- then to sever memories...no standards of nobility remained...You can find people glued to you like cement and they won't let go and the links were not made now, but centuries ago. The surprise was to pick up those links in a god-forsaken country like Botswana. Everything was here, the past and the future. I was struggling to destroy the past, knowing that it had no place in the future (13.8.1971 KMM BHP).

Here Bessie Head places herself outside the constraints of linear time as she attempts to make sense of experiences which she describes as no less than torture, the elements of which are evident throughout her writing: love, power, evil, and the enduring power of history to affect the individual's life in the present. She also acknowledges how her own experiences prompted her to hostile actions against others.

Bessie Head inevitably felt that much of the cause of her distress lay within herself, and she comments upon this directly in her letters as well as indirectly throughout her published work. For example, in the short story 'Tao' she suggests that 'Some people are a great trouble to themselves. They are overpossessed by violent extremes of feeling that allow them no rest but drive them on endlessly, restlessly' (50 TTP). In a letter written in July 1971 she referred directly to herself, saying:

I was really stark, raving mad for three years and the breakdown was long overdue. Three quarter part of it was caused by my own personality which is pretty horrible. No one was killed as I said. It was all in my own mind which was insane by then and remained insane for some time. I thought I watched myself but was totally blind to everything until I got thrown right over the cliff. That's where I am right now with very little hope of reaching solid ground again. Everything was removed from me especially an idea of God or goodness so I don't know my ending but I wait for it (4.7.1971 KMM BHP).

In her personal letters, Bessie Head continued to outline the terrifying experiences that beset her, as well as their consequences, which she would eventually incorporate into *A Question of Power*. For example, she knocked an 'old white woman volunteer from England (slightly) on the head' (9.2.1972 KMM BHP), and it seems this action was also implicated in her arrest by the police and subsequent hospitalization shortly thereafter. In March 1971 she wrote that

Masire, vice-president was shot over Christmas. News of his death was blanked out. I watched things for some time, reeling with shock, then after 3 weeks of silent torture raced out of the house and stuck a poster on the post office, defaming the president Seretse Khama: saying where's the body of Masire? Why is the death hidden? The police took me to hospital. I appeared in court, I said I'd done that and that to find Masire. They merely referred my statements to the high court, Lobatsi (25.3.1971 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head's focus here is on eminent figures in Botswana political life. As well as expressing her belief that Masire had been killed, she pinned up at the Serowe Post Office a notice accusing Sir Seretse Khama of being a 'filthy pervert who sleeps with his daughter' and of hiding dead bodies (19.9.1982 KMM BHP). In a personal letter she sheds some light on her preoccupation with Seretse Khama and what he represented to her, saying:

I can't write to Seretse Khama the president and say the following:

1. Look here, you started this. Most people do not have the cold and objective sensation of direct telepathic communication with someone like you dressed up as a monk. Most people do not keep up, unwillingly, a nightmare for 6 years (12.11.1973 KMM BHP).

In this letter, written in 1973, Bessie Head describes her nightmare as extending for as long as 6 years and places the blame for her experiences directly with Seretse Khama:

2. What were those pictures you issued in August 1968 on a Saturday morning that got my child assaulted and me spat at?
3. Who is Medusa who assaulted me? Who is Dan? I'm not as capable as you of complacently sitting in the company of the devil, day in, day out. Who is assaulting me, night after night, such terrible blows - you or Dan? For how long does this go on (12.11.1973 KMM BHP).

Here she asks questions about the pictures she believed to have been circulated which resulted in both she and her son being assaulted. She also asks questions about the duration of her torment and the characters involved in it. She never asks, however, amid all her questioning, why this should happen to her. This is the one question she never needs to ask since not only does she already know the answer, she embodies it.

As I have already suggested, the power, wealth and prominence of these figures was in complete contrast to Bessie Head's insecurity and poverty. Thus, Seretse Khama became the focus, for a time, of all that she felt was wrong with her own life. In contrasting her own situation with that of the President she makes this explicit:

4. Ever since you were born you have had servants waiting on you. You have lived in comfort. If I am ill I have nothing. I have always been abysmally poor. Now my heart is broken by this endless struggle. If you have a cold you stay in bed for three days and it comes over the radio. I have to ask people to take my child to London if I am secretly killed by either you or Dan - I don't know who (12.11.1973 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head emphasizes her suffering here, contrasting the significance of others with her own insignificance. However, if others want her killed, this also indicates that her life has sufficient importance for others to want to end it, therefore also highlighting her strength and power to survive terrible circumstances. However, whether or not a writer can directly describe the experience of madness is contentious, since the core components that characterize it are said to involve the disappearance of or at least the decline of 'rational...organisation in human conduct and experience' (Sass 1992, 1). It has been suggested that a person experiencing a psychotic episode is trapped in an 'autistically self-contained world of illusion and is scarcely open at all to interpersonal communication' (Keitel 1989, 5). As such, it is beyond the margins of discourse. However, one of the anomalies of schizophrenia is how it can also confound such descriptions. As Sass reports

Curiously, many patients who have long given the impression of being severely incapacitated may under the right circumstances, show themselves to be quite capable of intact speech and intellectual functions, of appropriate emotional reactions, and

even of making practical decisions and cooperating with others (24).

Certainly, some of Bessie Head's work, particularly *A Question of Power* so strongly evokes the sensation of madness that it has led Jacqueline Rose to say 'I am not sure that it is possible to read this book without feeling oneself go a little bit mad' (1994, 404). However, Bessie Head had already transcribed what was almost the raw, unmediated material of her experiences into PATTERNS PICTURES IMPRESSIONS, the prototype for *A Question of Power*, which, like its eventual successor, pivots on issues of power, sexuality, love and hate, all the elements that made up her personal suffering. It also introduced some of the characters who were to appear in *A Question of Power*. She described PATTERNS as 'fragmentary speculation on events which took place here and in South Africa and which I tried to make coherent' (undated letter KMM BHP). She sent it to her publisher, but said that it was returned with the comment that 'if such stuff had to get around I would simply be labelled nut, crack, lunatic etc' (undated letter KMM BHP).

The central character of PATTERNS was called the 'Long Profile' and Bessie Head gave him the 'key position and the major trump cards' (Undated letter KMM BHP). As with other characters, she communicated with him directly and he was obviously very much part of her reality, setting out for her the 'sound moral platform, totally unshakeable -- thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not lie, thou shalt not steal' (Undated letter KMM BHP) which is derived from Christianity, and that one of her



perceived future roles, that of prophet, would require of her. The other male character in this piece was known as the 'Deep Ridge' and both men were accompanied by their wives and by 'Dan' who, in this version, was a woman:

The 'Deep Ridge', the woman Dan and the wife of the 'Deep Ridge' were a strange triangle. They perhaps did not seem aware of the Long Profile and I most certainly imagined myself very much in love with 'Deep Ridge', whereas he and I and the wife and Dan were really re-living a strangely complicated drama. I for one committed a great crime at one stage where I killed the wife of 'Deep Ridge'. I re-ran the story up to the point where I had a two sided experience. In one picture I said to the wife of 'Deep Ridge': 'Don't worry. I'm going to push him to the test. I'm going to bring him to the point where he is about to kill you and see what he does' (Undated letter KMM BHP).

The threat of individual destruction, ever-present throughout Bessie Head's work, is predominant in PATTERNS:

All the patterns and play of destiny unfolded before the Long Profile and his role in it and the other giants who all worked to make up the soul of God. There was one thing Long Profile did after this insight. He turned round and tried to kill me, not by his hand but by my own hand, to force me into committing suicide (Undated letter KMM BHP).

In PATTERNS, the hatred and desire for vengeance that is not expressed overtly within Bessie Head's earlier work, and which she perhaps did not even directly acknowledge as feeling, moves outward from her beleaguered self into characters who express unequivocally a metaphorical approximation of her lived reality. This continues on into *A Question of Power*, where Elizabeth labels herself constantly, mirroring the dominant view of those around her. Issues of normality and abnormality, of madness and insanity, which are approached more obliquely in her earlier novels are now foregrounded in this, probably the most widely discussed of Bessie Head's works, and the one most

generally accepted as autobiographical in the conventional sense. It is also in this novel that she finally aligns her own experience directly with that of a female character rather than representing herself through her male characters. Hitherto she had acknowledged her thought processes as masculine:

Some of my thinking is so forceful that I couldn't create female characters to carry them, so I am both in essence, Makhaya and Maru and it was only in Elizabeth that I broke free and created a feminine vehicle for my thoughts, exactly as I wanted to express them (26.6. 1974 KMM BHP).

Like Bessie Head, Elizabeth suffers a vertiginous intensification of the stresses she has been subjected to during her life. She was a member of a subordinate racial group, a woman within that group, carrying her own personal and unique individual experiences with her to an alien environment. In Botswana, she then found the insecurity and oppression that had hitherto patterned her life was compounded by the acute sense of disorientation she felt in her new environment, and she began 'losing track of the personality pattern she'd lived with since birth' (131 QP). In Botswana there was also an added complication. In South Africa, racial divisions were based on colour and hence the source of oppression was clear, and clearly hated:

'Subterraneously it was a powerful willing of the total extinction of the white man. He aroused a terrible hatred' (83 QP). This also has terrifying effects upon those who hate, for example Elizabeth hates whites with a terrifying intensity which, if expressed directly, may bring about reprisals by those more powerful than she. Yet her need to express her feelings was a powerful one and existed even though it was internalized, made subterranean, in her phrase. In Botswana, Elizabeth found that while racial oppression also existed, it was less easily

located. Elizabeth, neither white nor African, comes to hate and fear Africans as much as she hates and fears whites.

Another reason for Bessie Head's hatred of those in power, whatever their colour, was because they curtailed her physical freedom. Her life was restricted in South Africa because of her colour; having left the country and moved to Botswana, she was not allowed to re-enter. She was required to report to the police for many years, and not allowed to move freely around Botswana because of her refugee status, her poverty, and the physical demands and constraints attendant upon caring for her small son. Bessie Head was thus effectively imprisoned in the village of Serowe which was incorporated into her fictionalized villages of Dilepe, Motabeng and Golema-Midi. It stands on the very edge of the Kalahari desert, and as such, it occupied a liminal position which was the objective correlative of Bessie Head's own inner position on the complex racial horizon of black and white, as well as on the psychological horizon between her mother's madness and her own life in its shadow, and the 'sanity' that is perceived to be the norm. Such positionings were fundamental to Bessie Head's existence, and as a woman of mixed race, placed on a racial and sexual borderline by the dominant group, she thus encountered in Botswana, a frighteningly alien but strangely familiar landscape where the 'normal and the abnormal' (15, QP) which in *A Question of Power* begin to blend in Elizabeth's mind. Karl Jaspers' definition of madness is that of a 'borderline situation', and at this 'farthest borderland of human existence' lies 'the annihilation of consciousness itself' (Sass 1992, 15). This description is particularly pertinent to Bessie Head who is

located by others in a position where her consciousness was under constant threat of an annihilation. This takes horrific forms in *A Question of Power*, where Elizabeth is visited by Sello who takes her to a 'deep cesspit...filled almost to the brim with excreta' (53 QP):

He caught hold of her roughly behind the neck and pushed her face near the stench. It was so high, so powerful, that her neck nearly snapped off her head at the encounter. She whimpered in fright. She heard him say, fiercely: 'She made it. I'm cleaning it up. Come, I'll show you what you made' (53 QP).

Mary Douglas (1995) suggests that concern with entrances and exits of the body, eating and excreting, reflects communal anxiety about the precarious boundaries of society. In situations where people are rendered both highly visible yet paradoxically invisible because of their colour, gender or disability, such boundaries take on particular significance. In this novel Elizabeth's position forces her to play two roles, the oppressed and, in her position of the observer of horrors, the oppressor. Elizabeth becomes the passive observer of a scenario composed of her creator's ambiguous ontological status, her sense of worthlessness, of racial and sexual inferiority all evident in images of her being suspended over pits of excrement, witnessing scenes of sexual perversion and debasement and the humiliation of other human beings. Bessie Head thus transforms into her writing her feelings about the oppressive system that threatened to overwhelm her and her fears of becoming the 'receiver of horror' (131 QP), as well as her fear that she may also be part of it.

It is in *A Question of Power* that Mouse transmutes into Elizabeth. Initially she moves from frozen silence into a passive and silent observer of horror, who 'lives more in contact with her soul than with

living reality (1.4.1972 KMM BHP). However, it is not long before Elizabeth's explosive vocalization occurs. One example of this is Dan's assault on Elizabeth's mind, which explodes into 'a thousand fragments of fiery darkness' (141 QP). Another is her anguished cry of 'Oh, you bloody bastard Batswana!!' (51 QP) with which she brings her plight to the attention of the head of the primary school, the 'Eugene man' (61 QP), in reality Patrick van Rensburg, himself a South African exile with some measure of understanding of her difficulties. It is in her portrayal of Elizabeth that Bessie Head most clearly articulates the 'monstrous horror' (10.6. 1975 KMM BHP) that she had felt in the background of her life 'all the while struggling to kill me, with the most ferocious force' (10.6. 1975 KMM BHP). It was this that informed a madness that had as many meanings for her as it has for her readers and critics but which, for her, was inextricable from her personal experience and her response to it. Bessie Head had no hesitation in referring to her experiences as a breakdown, and there is no doubt that she suffered terribly. However, despite appearing to have had only medical forms of treatment, she had sufficient insight to say that 'In 1970 I experienced a year of insomnia... Maybe I resolved some of it in the only way possible. I broke down and drew attention to my distress' (8.12.1981 KMM BHP ). The insomnia of which she speaks could certainly be seen as a component of schizophrenia which, it has been argued, is a sort of death-in-life, and that what dies within an individual

is not the rational so much as the appetitive soul, not the mental so much as the physical and emotional aspects of one's being; this results in detachment from the natural rhythms of the body and entrapment in a sort of morbid wakefulness or hyperawareness (Sass 1992, 7-8).

Yet the wakefulness Bessie Head experienced allowed her to directly acknowledge of her own suffering and that of others in similar situations, although this brought with it both pain and terror. The alternatives would have been to sleep, but in the short story *Tao* she said: 'Man may sleep for just so long then he must awaken to pain, heartbreak, the struggles of ambition, power, achievement' (53 TTP). However, both sleep and wakefulness carried the danger of unrelenting mental illness. Indeed, in *A Question of Power* Elizabeth initially enjoys submitting to the 'billowing darkness' (21 QP) that surrounds her, which soon gives way to terror when, three months after her arrival in Motabeng, her life keels over into madness as she submits to more than elemental forces.

Bessie Head continued to experience periods of extreme distress and even as late as 1978 she wrote 'I am at the point of complete breakdown. Oh, I have had several breakdowns and who cares?' (23.11.1978 KMM BHP). Nevertheless she preferred to fight the 'living death' as best she could. She described her ability to do so in masculine terms: 'Prepared to battle it out like hell. Ha! Ha! Don't need Stellazine. Am a tough guy now' (quoted in Vigne, 18). Stelazine is the brand name for Trifluoperazine which is used in the treatment of schizophrenia and related psychoses, for tranquillization in behavioural disturbances and in the treatment of severe anxiety. The 'living death' she experienced can also be interpreted, however, in non-medical ways. The most important factor influencing Bessie Head's view was the culture of South Africa and that of her family history, peopled by the powerful and the powerless, and bound together in a

terrible game. Bessie Head experienced a number of specific problems in relating herself to the cultures and societies around her, both in South Africa and Botswana, and their origins at least in part, lay in her immediate environments. Thomas Szasz argues that mental illness is

a true heir to religious myths in general, and to the belief in witchcraft in particular; the role of all these belief-systems was to act as *social tranquillizers*, thus encouraging the hope that mastery of certain specific problems may be achieved by means of substitutive (symbolic-magical) operations (1960, 118).

Bessie Head made it clear that

a form of cruelty, really spite, that seems to have its origins in witchcraft practices. It is a sustained pressure of mental torture that reduces its victim to a state of permanent terror, and once they start on you they don't know where to stop, until you become stark, raving mad. Then they just grin (137 QP).

For example, she had no hesitation in linking her supernatural characters to madness:

There is an aspect of godliness or soul greatness that is very akin to insanity. I have rarely seen the souls of gods without a vicious, dangerous side, as though total perfection, immediately acquired, would take the spice out of the game (8.4.1970 KMM BHP).

The odds against her winning the game were, however, very high. Her very existence was 'illegal', and she believed that her mother had been imprisoned in a mental institution because of her relationship with a black African, thereafter taking her own life. She carried the stigma of being born in a mental institution, a place where medical treatment and punishment merge in the name of psychiatry. The specific role of psychiatry is that of the social moderator of conformity, 'patrolling the uneasy borderline between illness and political dissent'

(Littlewood & Lipsedge 1989, 273), and where the humanity of those perceived to stand outside the norms of society is frequently stripped away. She was also subject to the abiding racist myth that those of

mixed racial origins are more vulnerable to mental illness than others, as well as the prophesy that she, like her mother would inevitably become mad.

Not only did Bessie Head strive to free herself from the destructive effects of oppression, but also to remain true to her own experience. She placed a high premium upon her honesty, saying

The only thing that counts between me and other people is that we always tell the truth to each other. I take telling the truth so much for granted I never stop to think of what I would say. Since so many people don't know how to make a straight deal, the central part of my life, truthfulness, even of our unconscious nature, brings a lot of hell colliding into me (5.2.1970 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head told her own truth in her own way, even though it was often a hellish truth, and this brought her a recognition of possible solutions to her existential dilemmas. One of Foucault's central tenets is that where there is power there is resistance. Like Freire, he sees power not as thing that one person might have at another's expense, but a complex process, affected by numerous factors. While there are groups and individuals whose power is limited, there is generally some way in which the power they do have can be exercised. One is by answering Sartre's question 'What can I decide to be if I am already what I am: if I am 'locked up in my being?' (quoted in Laing & Cooper 1965, 75). Theresa Dovey suggests that Bessie Head's statement 'I have always just been me, with no frame of reference beyond myself' (Gardner 1986, 114) is her

expression of an impossible but liberatory desire to be simply identical to herself, to avoid the passage of the self through the Symbolic system, in which the individual subject receives a name and an identity. Gardner's attempt to *name* her is a violation of this desire, and represents an attempt to locate Head *within* a system which she herself preferred to negate. It also implies a refusal to recognize the potential for resistance in that which



may be considered *unnameable* in terms of the system: Head is not white, not black, not feminist, not revolutionary. She wished to be regarded as simply herself: like her mother, unknown and unpredictable' (Dovey 1989, 34-35).

What Bessie Head appears to have wanted is for others to see her as she saw herself, but since this was, at least in part, made up of how others saw her it was a difficult undertaking, involving the process of liberating herself from the 'living death' imposed upon her by others. To go mad, in this context, can be seen as the ultimate form of resistance, where an individual throws themselves into their entire being in order to coincide with it, to be what they already are, and to fully acknowledge the horror of their own reality which, paradoxically, ensures their survival. Joseph Conrad's Dutch trader Stein advised 'The way is to the destructive element submit yourself and with the exertion of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up (1949, 181). Bessie Head was familiar with Conrad and it was in *A Question of Power* that what she called 'THE HORROR, THE HORROR' (saying 'this latter favourite I picked up from Conrad' (5.4. 1983 KMM BHP) was made manifest. To conceptualize and acknowledge this horror, Bessie Head was limited to using the same vocabulary that is available to all of us. She translated the oppression and the constraints upon her into the idioms of religion, humiliation, rejection, guilt and sexual obsession. Whilst her characters can be interpreted as the stuff of fantasy, as delusions, as the elements of psychosis, they are also embodiments of Bessie Head's everyday reality and of her history. The voices of Dan, Medusa, Sello and other characters reflect the multiple voices of those around her,

those of an apartheid system which was neither a delusion or a fiction. It attempted to steal the souls, selves, minds, lives of the majority of South Africa's population. This was neither a delusion or a fiction. The apartheid state, like any oppressive state, is a tyrant, a torturer, an assassin, a child murderer. As a desperate attempt to communicate her experience she brought her life to a turning point by her actions at the Post Office. There, at a place where letters were sent to all parts of the world, she made public her declaration of a lifetime's humiliation and negation into a statement about the President of Botswana, an important and powerful figure, perhaps the synthesis of all the powerful figures and systems who had affected her life. In this way she ensured that others would also acknowledge her suffering. Her communications had other benefits. For example, in *A Question of Power* Elizabeth finds that she is not alone, since in the hospital a nurse tells her 'The teachers at Motabeng Secondary love you very much' (177 QP). People cared for her son while she was away, and they also cared for her on her return. Her personal response articulated, as accurately as she was able, the apparent extremes of 'living life' and 'living death' of her reality. These were independent yet inextricable from one another, static yet dynamic, illustrative of her complex response to her world and with the particular configurations of knowledge and power in which she was caught up. Nevertheless, by 1980 she was able to write 'There is a sturdy sanity about everything I do' (20.6.1980 KMM BHP). With regard to *A Question of Power* she wrote 'It has the appearance of survival. I never felt that but there was a period of terrible anguish and a feeling of happiness and liberation' (20.6.1980 KMM BHP).

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### WORK AND SURVIVAL

*You find an identity in work and immediately become a part of everything*  
(18.1.1976 KMM BHP).

*It is only in work that has no connection with the self that we can find rest to our spirits* (Women and Labour, Olive Schreiner London Virago, 1978, 3).

In this chapter I want to examine Bessie Head's approach to the natural world, to work on the land and its literary portrayal, and her changing focus after the writing and publication of *A Question of Power* when her interests became closely linked to her feelings about Khama the Great, the Botswana leader who kept the land safe from the fate of South Africa and to whom she felt a particular affinity. Nevertheless, Bessie Head's characteristic ambivalence is also present, which shows how pervasive the 'living death' was, even in those areas of her life which gave her joy and a sense of power, and which generated meaning and value. While this saves her work from becoming a pastoral idyll it was these areas that played an important part in the 'living life' that ensured her physical and psychic survival against the forces of 'living death'.

Bessie Head noted her change of focus herself, saying that 'having defined the personal my work became more social and outward looking' (11.8.1982 KMM BHP). She wrote and published *Serowe, Village of the Rain Wind*, and her volume of short stories *Collector of Treasures*, published in

1977, grew in part from this. Several of the short stories in this collection had been published earlier. For example, 'Heaven is not Closed' appeared in *Black World* in December 1975, 'Looking for a Rain God' and 'The Special One' appeared in *Essence* in June 1975, 'Life' appeared in *Encounter* in June 1975, 'Witchcraft' appeared in *Ms* in November 1975 and the 'Collector of Treasures' was published in *Ms* in June 1977, charting her increasing status as a writer. Craig MacKenzie said of these later works that 'the intention is to express the hopes, aspirations, disappointments and joys of the inhabitants of the village which Bessie Head came to adopt as her own' (1989, 15), and that she goes on from this point to explore in a more 'open and outwardly-reaching way' way the lives of the villagers around her (1989, 48). Her final work encompassed Southern African history told in her own way, using a novelistic form and semi-fictional content. She said of *A Bewitched Crossroad*, which bore the subsidiary title of 'An African Saga' that 'The novel is not intended to be an accurate history of the Sebina clan or family but rather that the personality of Sebina was shaped as being representative of what history could have been like then' (Author's Note, 7 BC). She acknowledged her need to change her direction, saying 'I cannot afford it. I cannot afford to write any more of those tear-drenched letters until I see how I make out as a normal human being' (27.12.1972 KMM BHP). She said she was unable to 'survive in the heat of the moment' (ix, SVRW), and felt that

there is no personal saviour, not anything like a miracle that will turn and give a helping hand. The road back to sanity is sheer stiff work -- reasoning, understanding, analysis and a complete grasp of evil, that basically it is a living force clutching at the guts of life (25.6.1973 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head indicates here her understanding of the nature of the 'sheer stiff work' she had engaged in before, during and after her breakdown and its function as a survival strategy to defeat the 'living death'. She felt, like Makhaya, that:

...death was like trying to clutch the air, and you had to let it be and slowly let it pass aside, without fuss and indignity. Instead, you had to concentrate the mind on all that was still alive and treat it as the most precious treasure you had ever been given. Besides, he had felt all the pain he was capable of feeling the night before, and it had directed his actions along this new path (165-6 RC).

Bessie Head's writing itself was, of course, work, and writing will be the main focus of my final chapter. However, she said 'I need a standby occupation other than my writing. I can produce a garden in a day. I have loved this work' (7.6.1985 KMM BHP). While it is easy to idealize or romanticize the value and meaning of work, there is no doubt that some forms of work can be dangerous, that boring, meaningless, repetitive work can be destructive, and that lack of choice in regard to meaningful work can have an impact upon people's sense of themselves in often damaging ways. Nevertheless Bruno Bettelheim (1961), for example, found from research undertaken during his period of imprisonment in a concentration camp in 1939, that prisoners who endured terribly degrading circumstances gained a sense of self-respect and meaning to their lives (205) by attempting to work well during a period when all self-determination was taken away from them (151). Bessie Head, as I have already mentioned, often drew parallels in her writing between her own experience and that of prisoners of concentration camps, saying that *A Question of Power* related

not only to 'evils practised in South Africa but the Belsens and Dachau's of Hitler's time, more to Hitler than anything else' (7.9.1978 KMM BHP). Using less extreme examples, the psychologist Michael Argyle found in his studies that however much people disliked their work, they disliked losing it even more. He found there are benefits to even the most repetitive work, whether paid or unpaid, if it gives structure to the use of time, provides individuals with access to social contacts, and links them to broad goals and purposes (1987, 62). Work, then, can be a source of status, of a sense of identity, of meaning, and of happiness. This latter was defined by Argyle as 'satisfaction with life, or as the frequency and intensity of positive emotions' rather than as 'entirely the opposite of unhappiness' (13).

Perhaps one of the most comprehensive studies on the subject of happiness, one which describes work as a valuable means to psychic survival, and which is particularly pertinent to the meaning of work within Bessie Head's life is Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow: The Psychology of Happiness* (1992). Csikszentmihalyi claims that our ordinary state of mind involves unexpected and frequent episodes of entropy that interrupt the otherwise smooth run of psychic energy, leaving the self feeling vulnerable, anxious or threatened hundreds of times a day. If, however, an individual can become totally involved in some worthwhile and challenging activity with realistic goals and requiring intense concentration, then their body and/or their mind is stretched to its limits. This investment of psychic energy or attention creates order in consciousness, and the

worries and frustrations of everyday life disappear, along with one's sense of self, resulting in a feeling of union with the environment.

Csikszentmihalyi believes that this loss of self-consciousness can lead to self-transcendence, to a feeling that the boundaries of our being have been pushed forward. When we are not preoccupied with ourselves, we actually have a chance to expand the concept of who we are and to 'grow into a more complex being' (1992, 6). Csikszentmihalyi calls this the 'flow' experience. Once it is over, the sense of self emerges more strongly and the individual 'feels more "together" than before, not only internally but also with respect to other people and to the world in general' (41). To describe the complexity of this process, he quotes Victor Frankl, who says that 'success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue...as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a course greater than oneself (quoted in Csikszentmihalyi, 1992, 2). Bessie Head put it another way: 'You find your attention completely arrested and as you go on it remains at that same pitch of fascinated interest' (14.8.1976 KMM BHP). She also felt that work was the source of an acceptable sense of identity, one that connected her to 'everything'. The happiness work could bring was shared by an earlier writer from a very different background: Olive Schreiner spoke of a sense of 'a strange sudden sweetness breaking in upon her earnest work; not sought for, but found' (1979, 195). In describing the effect work had upon her, she said 'I don't seem to have any self; I am all lost in my work' (First & Scott 1980, 18). That two such diverse writers divided by time and culture should share experiences documented by Csikszentmihalyi is not surprising. After conducting extensive research, he drew the conclusion

that the flow experience was reportedly the same around the world regardless of cultural differences or of affluence and poverty (1992, 4). Such benefits as wealth and physical fitness are, in his view, neutral, and can only be truly beneficial if they make us feel better, since it is the quality of the experience that improves the quality of life (1).

The significance of work for all women, however, has always been immense, and often controversial. According to Christine Qunta, African women traditionally had a valued social, political and economic role, which gave way under the colonial encounter to that of 'landless farm labourers, domestic servants and perpetual minors' (1987, 80). While I have questioned this value elsewhere, it is apparent that, whatever the traditional sexual division of labour, it was affected by the breaking down of family and community structures under colonialism and that this had a destructive effect upon women. In South Africa, for example, women were used to control the black male labour force. When men had to leave their homes to find work, women were initially forbidden to migrate. This encouraged men to return home to them and ensured a frequent replacement of migrant labour. Later, women were allowed to go with their husbands in an attempt to stabilize the labour force (Cutrufelli 1983, 22-3). There has been little opportunity in the past for many black women in South Africa to gain sufficient formal education and thus avoid being used by the dominant white male group to ensure a continuous source of black labour, to provide for the black man's domestic needs, or to take unskilled work, usually as domestic labour for white women, where they are easily replaced.



While the significance of work for African and European women appears to be very different, the disappearance or devaluation of work affects all women profoundly. For example, in Western pre-industrial society women worked in the skilled trades as tailors, shoemakers, chandlers, as well as in the retailing and provision trades. They also participated in all forms of agricultural work and, rather than being 'kept' by men, they paid their own way. The skills now perceived as traditional women's skills such as spinning and embroidery were once a key part of the gross national product, but have been economically marginalized and devalued since medieval times. By the seventeenth century the Church and the legal system had begun to limit women's professional work, although they continued to wield power in the sphere of health for some time until this, too, was appropriated by men (Oakley 1981, 138). Earlier this century a 'marriage bar' prevented married women 'pursuing professional careers' (Humm 1991, 36). As Winifred Holtby pointed out 'Whenever society has tried to control the opportunities, interests and powers of women, it has done so in the sacred names of marriage and maternity' (quoted in Humm 1991, 36).

Their exclusion from forms of labour other than childbearing has had far-reaching effects upon women from many different backgrounds and has been expressed by different women writers in their work. Olive Schreiner, for example, felt that work was so important to women that she wrote in 1911 'Give us labour or we die!' (1978, 44). For Schreiner, women had been robbed of their labour and reduced to a state of 'morbid inactivity' (49). She makes this clear in her novel *The Story of an African Farm*, where

Lyndall's only meaningful labour is that of delivering a child, 'a tiny thing, only lived two hours', losing her own life shortly thereafter (1979, 269). This illustrates how the bearing of children, often seen as the main reason for women's existence, was often experienced by many women as forced labour because their other choices were either limited or non-existent. Unable to find meaning and significance in the only area of labour available to her, Lyndall ceases to search for a 'living life' of her own and instead chooses a 'living death' of withdrawal which eventually gives way to physical death.

The complexities of work for contemporary South African women remain manifold. Both the negative and positive aspects are portrayed, for example, in Miriam Tlali's autobiographical novel *Muriel at Metropolitan*. Muriel is racked with guilt because she is part of an organization that drags her own people into debt for goods they cannot afford. Indeed, she fears for her safety if her neighbours in Soweto find out she is responsible for the threatening letters many of them receive when they cannot keep up their payments:

Every time I was forced to be 'loyal to the firm' I would get those cramps deep down in my entrails. Every time I asked for a customer's pass book, I would feel like a policeman, who, in this country, is the symbol of oppression. I would continue to feel like a traitor, part of a conspiracy, a machinery deliberately designed to crush the soul of a people (1987, 140).

Tlali describes how white people's lot is made bearable because they know that there is someone less privileged than themselves, and that it is when they feel themselves to be treated equally with other racial groups,

they become resentful. Yet Muriel also recognizes that the struggles of the workers are in many ways similar:

We were all dissatisfied, all trying to get the best out of life, but we were struggling on different battlefields. For the whites, the struggle was that of human beings trying to better themselves. For the blacks it was that of the underdogs, voiceless and down-trodden. In addition to the difficult task of making a living, we still had to labour under the effects of a rigid apartheid system supported by our own colleagues. Yet we had the same problems. We were all under the thumb of a demanding boss, who was unyielding in many ways; giving little consideration to the fact that we had private lives of our own, homes and dependants to look after (163).

In this subjugation of personal life to the demands of paid employment, work can transcend racial categories. For example, Muriel says that

Office workers, mechanics, technicians, we were all more or less engaged in the same tasks at the same time. The colour of our skins did not come into it - there was work to be done, and the boss had equal confidence in all of us. When there was an error in the office records, he did not care what colour the hand was that made the error, only whose handwriting it was. When a radio or motor was damaged in the workshop, it did not matter if the mechanic responsible was white or black (163).

Work becomes ultimately liberating for Muriel in that whilst engaged in it she is able to establish communication with a wide range of people and evaluate their circumstances as well as her own. She is also able to move from victimization to power through her recognition and acknowledgement of a corrupt system. Her awareness empowers her to draw the line and leave Metropolitan. Although she then loses a better paid job because of the lack of a toilet for black people, one can conclude that since the novel is autobiographical, and Tlali is now a successful writer using her own experience for material, that she has been able to extract meaning and significance from her lived experience and to translate it into literature.

The ambiguities and complexities of work for Bessie Head are evident in different and more complex ways. As a woman born and brought up in South African cities, with sufficient education to enable her to work there both as a teacher and journalist, and later in Botswana as a teacher, she was able to engage in work generally seen as meaningful and carrying with it significant social status. However, she also made it very clear that she recognised the intrinsic value of all work

I feel that it is all the same level, it is all work...baking a cake, rearing children, making a beautiful dress...there is no difference whatsoever between that activity and writing a novel...each gives joy or each demands so much effort and energy from the human heart (Sandler 1983, 53).

She was also able to value herself as a worker, and it is clear that whatever work she did gave her a strong sense of self-esteem: 'I'm a really terrific secretary of an unconventional kind just as I am a terrific vegetable gardener' (31.3.1980 KMM BHP). Nevertheless, she experienced a number of difficulties in her working life, which resulted in her giving up the teaching job she had taken in Botswana. The precariousness of her day to day existence required that she continue to look for stable employment, and even as late as 1981, when she was an established writer, she pointed out that 'Over the past year I have struggled to find employment to break off a dependency on a very unstable income and so far I have not succeeded (10.4.1981 KMM BHP). To this end, she engaged in a number of different occupations throughout her life. For example, in 1979 she worked temporarily in a British Council office and in the dispatch centre of the Botswana Book Centre (17.12.1979 KMM BHP) whilst in Gaborone trying to find some study opportunities for her son and registering him as a

Botswana citizen. However, because Bessie Head's sense of existence was under permanent threat, work had a significance far beyond that of economic survival and everyday satisfaction and the terrain on which she strove to establish a 'living life' against a 'living death' became the land itself and issues closely connected to it. Nevertheless, the natural world could also be as much a source of existential threat to Bessie Head as any other area of her life. One example of this is how the forces of nature in *A Question of Power* become precipitating factors in the crisis in Elizabeth's life as the darkness of the Botswana night is filled with a sense of evil and terror (21 QP). Johnny in *The Cardinals*, living and working with the fishermen, feels the elemental forces that surround him draining away his sense of self and indeed his life:

The life was like a slow death to him. It completely absorbed his restless, youthful vitality and the long silent hours spent on the vast, monotonous roll of the sea dazed his mind. It was as though the exhausting demands of the work were slowly changing him into something rigid and elemental like a dry, bleak tree that has been battered to death by exposure to fierce winds and storms...(49 C).

The bleakness of Bessie Head's descriptions of the Botswana landscape, resonant with the 'living death' gives her a measure of connection to the South African literary tradition. In English South African literature the landscape has been described as looming large, and having almost become a cliché (Gray 1979, 149-50) in its depiction of 'vast natural forces at work on puny beings in a way which is degrading and humiliating to human ambition' (150). In Stephen Gray's view this thwarts the human 'desire to take root in the land and belong' (151) as characterized by 'the English

South African novel at the innermost level' (154). According to Gray, it stunts individuals, 'offers them no harmonious, sympathetic growth' (151). Gray points out how a sense of exile is frequently expressed through 'images of aridity, impotence, deformity, isolation and rootlessness' and a death-laden decay (151) which in turn ensures that people remain permanently alienated, living in a 'felt state of zombiehood' (154). While this is evident, as Gray points out, in the works of Schreiner, Lessing, Paton and Gordimer, it is also present in which images of drought and deathliness that recur throughout Bessie Head's writing. There, the 'living death' of the Botswana landscape is a 'grey graveyard' (158 RC) where 'vultures reigned supreme' (159 RC) and signifies not only the everyday situation of a drought stricken country, but also the 'living death' of her own condition. From this perspective, the land was an objective correlative for her own experience of loss and desolation. Bessie Head's lack of ontological security, conveyed through her characters, is also clear in her description of the Botswana daybreak in which:

This white light quickly pulsates into a ball of molten gold and here in the sunrise, you can time the speed of the earth's rotation as the enormous fiery ball arises. It is barely a minute before it breaks clear of the flat horizon. It scares me. I say to myself: 'What the hell am I doing on something that moves so fast?' (ix/x SVRW).

Establishing a sense of 'living life' meant, for Bessie Head, becoming an integral part of the world itself rather than a passive traveller on a speeding vehicle, at the mercy of the inherent threat of 'living death' ever present in her environment. As Johnny, in *The Cardinals* points out, 'Life is a dangerous quicksand with no guarantee of safety anywhere. We

can only try to grab what happiness we can before we are swept off into oblivion' (137 C). For Bessie Head to establish a 'living life' was to remain a difficult undertaking in the circumstances in which she found herself. There were, however, ways in which Bessie Head could connect herself to the land, thus providing herself with many of the elements she needed for a 'living life' and this is evident in Makhaya's attachment to his new land:

As far as the eye could see it was only a vast expanse of sand and scrub but somehow bewitchingly beautiful. Perhaps he confused it with his own loneliness...perhaps he simply wanted a country to love and chose the first thing at hand (17 RC).

When almost overwhelmed by the complexities of her life, Bessie Head was able to seek the relative simplicity of nature where 'There is no end to African sky and African land. One might say that in its vastness is a certain kind of watchfulness that strips man down to his simplest form' (41 TTP). Yet it was working in nature and thereby becoming actively connected to it rather than passively observing it that provided Bessie Head with her greatest chance of a 'living life'. She said 'People who work with plants and animals like I do, see that they have their own, inviolate life, sort of self-absorbed' (8.12.1972 KMM BHP). The self-protection which was essential for Bessie Head's survival, then, could sometimes be achieved through absorption into a world which did more than simply threaten her with destruction. It also offered her happiness at little expense to herself: 'Ah, but happiness, anyway, was dirt cheap in Botswana. It was

standing still, almost in the middle of nowhere, and having your face coloured up gold by the setting sun' (141 RC). Bessie Head's letters, too,

indicate the pleasure she got from the natural world:

On the surface, I have a rather beautiful and full life. In the early morning I wake to feed some chickens I rear. Chickens are so stupid, they tend to adopt anyone who feeds them as mother. And individuals that they are, one little chick is not happy unless it is picked up and kissed, insisting on making itself the favourite (29.10.1972 KMM BHP).

For Johnny in *The Cardinals*, work in nature was as vital to his survival as it was a threat against it, since it was the 'only, and temporary, refuge from a sudden and violent death and hopeless, abysmal, crushing poverty' (49 C), thus ensuring his physical, psychic and economic survival. When he feels momentarily absorbed into nature and unfettered by human constraints, then the 'living death' is banished, since only 'The night alone, and the slow passage of the stars, could bring him briefly to life again' (49 C). In wondering 'where all those birds are racing to?' he can identify with them 'I am on a par with them because inside me I feel that same high-flying freedom. I say what I like. I do what I like and I think what I like. That's what I call inner freedom' (75).

The 'living life' of inner freedom that Bessie Head associated with work on the land was bound up with a strong sense of personal power, autonomy and control, since lack of choice and control were major elements of the 'living death':

Events beyond my control and with which I cannot reason or set in order inflict such terrible suffering and cruelty on me that I become totally adjusted to expecting permanent cruelty and torture from such



sources. The only way I can ever find peace is to remove myself from the area where my presence offends these sources of torture. It has often proved to be easier said than done (17.4.1979 KMM BHP).

While Bessie Head's capacity to remove herself physically were limited, there were other ways to find some measure of peace. Although she was to remain

frightened by what happens in the area an individual cannot control and influence...as an individual I am not helpless about managing my own life. I order it and control it so I know what's right and wrong in it and I am damn sure that the wrong is always faced up to and admitted (28.4. 1976 KMM BHP).

Because the dangers perceived by an individual can be perceived as being rendered manageable by the level of control they are able to exert, Argyle suggests that 'subjective well being is greater in those scoring high on internal control' and able to exercise 'choice in what they do' (1987, 116). Work was an area where both these elements came into play for Bessie Head, and it helped her to gain a sense of participating in determining the content of her life and exercising some control over it. In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, work provided Makhaya with the opportunity to establish a 'living life' by allowing him to exert some control over his environment, since it is one of his fears that 'one day he would find himself pitched back into the nightmare over which he had no control, just as he had had no control over the living processes which had created him' (135 RC).

In areas where Bessie Head was directly able to influence events surrounding her she could obtain some peace and enjoyment: 'Normally, the small things which I control, like my day-to-day living, my work and my

relationships with people are always in order and mostly peaceful' (17.4. 1979 KMM BHP). When such circumstances prevailed, she was able to say:

I had most of what I needed for my life. What I can control, my work and daily life -- that is in order. What I cannot control, things like acquiring citizenship of this country, and hideous forms of evil -- those things hang there like a terrible menace over my head (4.4.1974 KMM BHP).

While control over external events is important, it is also the case that, as Csikszentmihalyi points out, achieving a measure of control over consciousness leads to control over the quality of experience, enables a person to rid themselves of anxieties and fears, and become free of imprisoning controls of society, whose rewards they can then take or leave (1992, 22). Bessie Head was able to sustain sufficient intense concentration in physical work to enable her to impose a measure of control in this way. This was particularly evident in her writing about the land and nature, and the importance of work as a creative function is evidenced by her choice of epigraph to Part Three of *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, 'The Swaneng Project and Patrick van Rensburg', which is taken from Pasternak's *Dr Zhivago*:

What happiness it is to work from dawn to dusk for your family and yourself, to build a roof over their heads, to till the soil to feed them, to create your own world like Robinson Crusoe, in imitation of the creator of the universe (133 SVRW).

The first novel Bessie Head wrote in Botswana was one in which issues surrounding the land featured strongly. *When Rain Clouds Gather* was written between 1966 and 1968 on a refugee allowance of 'about \$3 a day and a diet of tea' (20.6. 1978 KMM BHP) and published in 1969. She said that:

'Golema Mmidi' where I lived for 5 months in 1966 was the Bamangwato Development Farm started by Tshekedi Khama and Guy Clutton Brock as a community project. It failed when Tshekedi died but I put a little of its history into Rain Clouds (26.7.1978 KMM BHP).

Golema-Mmidi is also 'one of the very few areas in the country where people were permanently settled on the land' and where, of necessity, they have been forced to 'make the land the central part of their existence' (22 RC). Many African villages depend upon work on the land for their physical survival, and this is exemplified in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, where the village is named for crop growing rather than for its chiefs or for the important events. The centrality of the land for the lives of Bessie Head's villagers is, however, as important for their psychic as their physical survival because, like Bessie Head herself, they have been rejected and dispossessed elsewhere. She was critical of this novel, because she felt it was 'so faulty, especially in agricultural detail, saying 'Then I worked with notes and no practical knowledge in a small hut in Francistown' (27.3.1973 KMM BHP). However, the importance of agricultural detail and the firmness and solidity of 'facts and scientific speculation' (81 RC) lies as much in their solidity and security as in their accuracy. Thus, by forging strong links with the land, and grounding themselves in facts, the inhabitants of the village are physically able to ground themselves, make meaningful their existence, and anchor themselves in a 'living life'. This is particularly evident in the character of Gilbert, the European whose enthusiasm for work leads him to establish the co-operative movement in Golemi-Mmidi where 'everything in him was submerged to the work he was doing' (30 RC). The project, having taken root in a drought ridden land of 'living death' that

is both literal and metaphorical, thus provides a world of work and scientific fact that shores up fragile selves and gives meaning to their existence. For example, Gilbert is in flight from England and his family, and marries Maria, whose personality is maintained by a 'barrier of aloofness and hostility' (72 RC). Thus his 'living life', like Bessie Head's own, appears unlikely to be successfully established in the realm of personal relationships. Hence he forges his own 'living life' in work 'Because, lack of work means death' (86 RC). Indeed, for Gilbert;

Life never seemed to offer enough work for his abundant energy, and his gaze forever restlessly swept the horizon seeking some new challenge, while at the same time his mind and hands could busy themselves with the most immediate and insignificant details in a continuous flow of activity like a wave (29 RC).

Makhaya involves himself in Gilbert's project at a time when he himself is:

almost a drowning man and this world of facts and scientific speculation seemed so much easier to handle. Therefore Makhaya turned to agriculture for his salvation, and also to Gilbert (81 RC).

Makhaya's close observation of the natural world and his endeavours to establish a 'living life' are closely bound together in project work, where he is able to concern himself with ideas and inventions. Rather than commit himself to the static goal of 'fame and importance' (6.6.1984 KMM BHP) which is posited as an alternative, Makhaya prefers the road that led to peace of mind. This is a road that is life itself in process, and it runs through Golema Mmidi, which is both an oasis in the desert and a repository of meaning.

While perhaps not achieving complete peace of mind in Serowe, it was there that Bessie Head achieved the measure of fame and importance which Makhaya eschewed, as well as a place in African literature:

I was supposed to leave Botswana through U.N. (sic) in 1968. While waiting for them to find a place for me, I was pressed by a New York publisher into writing "When Rain Clouds Gather", they sent me \$80 and forced me to write something. I had no idea then that the country would be flooded with foreign volunteers after independence. "When Rain Clouds Gather" is a best-seller on the aid programme circuit to this day. So I earned that audience quite unthinkingly (27.12.1976 KMM BHP).

With the writing and publication of *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Bessie Head indicated her desire to ground herself in her physical surroundings in Botswana through her creative work, both on the land and her writing itself. The importance of work as a means of survival continues on in the form of Margaret Cadmore's own creativity in Bessie Head's second published novel, *Maru*, to which I shall return in my final chapter. However, the importance of the land for her survival is revisited in *A Question of Power*, where it proves to be Elizabeth's road out of the nightmare world of the 'living death'. Although her 'internal life is all awry, and when I'm assaulted there I'm broken (69 QP)' it is in her life in the garden that she is able to find a measure of peace. There, she begins to break down the barriers of solitude and barrenness through her love for the earth and everything in it, and begins to fulfil her hopes to acquire 'freedom of heart' (11 QP). By engaging in a strenuous period of productivity, Elizabeth is also able to participate in an organic process of personal growth that mirrors her work on the land. It is significant that it is during the school holidays, when she has no work, that she experiences the

crisis in her life that culminates in her hospitalization, and that on her release from hospital, she walks down the road to the school amid the wonders of the natural world, on her return to the 'living life' of work.

In Elizabeth's physical work on the land, all of the elements that make up the importance of work for psychic survival are evident. The companionships forged through work prove to be valuable, as for example in 'Hunting', a short story in *The Collector of Treasures*. In this story, Thoko and Thato are involved in the needs of other people, and their whole rhythm of life is tied up in their work. They have also been happily married for three years, a rarity in Bessie Head's writings. In the garden Bessie Head, like Elizabeth, and like Thato and Thoto, was also able to build up social contacts, a network of friends, and engage in the shared goals that strengthen relationships. It is a place where she is also of use to others. For example, after her illness, Elizabeth is visited by Kenosi, who says:

You left the garden. I don't know how to. We became poor. When you were here we used to make R4.00 every week from vegetables; R4.00 from gooseberry jam. No one could do jam. The vegetables came down to R2.00 (203. QP).

She is encouraged to work by Kenosi, who also works with her hands, and who says 'I have always worked. I do any kind of work' (91 QP), and this encouragement is also evidence that others care for her. The vegetable garden is also both a place of learning and a place where Elizabeth can teach others, and through both the learning and the teaching process she is able to gain value in both her own eyes and the eyes of others. Work also gives structure to peoples' lives, and it is evident that the tasks

Bessie Head performed gave her life structure and meaning as well as having an economic and an aesthetic value. She said:

I was up to my ears cooking loads and loads of Cape Gooseberry jam. I prepared some holes for lemon trees as I have a good recipe for lemon marmalade jam. The Gooseberry sprang up wild on this rich soil preparation, and waves and waves of golden fruit fall to the ground (18.6.1985 KMM BHP).

Such tasks were a productive use of her time: 'the garden has to be watered, seedlings in the nursery sold, mail collected from town, clothes to be ironed. I do all this myself, so the day is never long enough to write all my books' (18.6.1985 KMM BHP). They were also deeply pleasurable, as for example in the evident joy in Bessie Head's description of Thoko's tending of her pumpkin, and in her wonderful descriptions of how life in the bush kindles Elizabeth's imagination and awakens in her 'a great wonder about the soil and the food it produced' (60 QP). Bessie Head's personal letters continue to show the significance of her own work in the garden: 'all the while my affairs took a dizzy reel I went out and dug in the garden and just now have a crop of tomatoes for sale in three months (4.2.1976 KMM BHP)'.

As I have already mentioned, the importance of work can be romantic and idealized. The ability of the individual to transcend difficulties through their work is inherent in the Romantic view that:

to be fully human is to work, and to work is to transform natural things ('the inorganic body of man') into human things and so, by psychological extension, to humanize all of nature and to integrate material nature with human nature (Abrams 1973, 314).

Such views have taken on a new significance in recent years, and their acceptance of a holistic vision of human beings as composed of mind, body and spirit is once again becoming popular. Such holism was attractive to Bessie Head, and through work both she and the characters she creates are able to bring about periodic reconciliations of soul/self, spirit, body. She said 'I cannot help seeing things in bits and bits just now and not as one great revelation and due to this one offers out ones homage to the goodness of life in bits and bits too' (24.1.1974 KMM BHP). According to Csikszentmihalyi (1992), it is through engagement in meaningful activity that a person will cease to see themselves as fragmented, and when the activity is over, they will grow as a person. If that engagement also uses the body, then a number of benefits ensue. In Roger Poole's book *Towards Deep Subjectivity*, he quotes the German idealist Fichte's assertion that the body is the matrix of a person's rights and their ethical will in the world:

The will of the person enters the sensuous world only insofar as it is expressed in the determination of the body. In the sphere of the sensuous world the body itself of a free being is, therefore, to be regarded as itself the final ground of its own determination... (1972, 28).

In working with the body, Elizabeth, in *A Question of Power*, determines her body's use and thus asserts her freedom to use it as a means of production and for the transmission of knowledge and skill. Her body thereby acquires meaning, use and value, and is no longer a thing to be degraded, as it is in the scenes of perverse sexuality that characterize large parts of *A Question of Power*. Working on the land and in her garden also provided Bessie Head with the means to literally ground herself, and provided her



with a refuge from the nightmare world she often inhabited. In it, she could relate herself to something that gave her life meaning and direction:

I usually have the cracks of my hands full of mud from digging in the garden but one never notices because everyone else here is a labourer and when I have to get out of the shell I've made for myself here I get panic-stricken (5.10.1973 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head's feelings towards the garden perhaps most nearly resemble those of the Jamaican-born writer Michelle Cliff, with whom she corresponded for a time. Cliff writes that the garden is :

Not a walled place- in fact, open on all sides.  
Not secret - but private.  
A private open space (quoted in C. Kaplan 1990, 367).

Cliff writes that 'to garden is a solitary act' (367), and working in the garden provided Bessie Head with both the privacy and the openness she needed, and an activity which gave her the freedom of open space and solitude without loneliness. She said 'I like the long lonely hours of brooding solitude because that is my particular strength and my whole temperament depends on a lot of peace and quiet' (5.7.1974 KMM BHP). She goes on to quote from *Maru*

"The same things were done each day and slowly the picture of the universe unfolded on the canvas"...That very repetition of daily events and chores made me happy. I was trying to run away from other things over which I had no control. I have a control over the most beautiful things on earth and I was unhappy that I had been forced to see other worlds so hideous that they are hard to believe (5.7.1974 KMM BHP).

The world of nature provided Bessie Head with a vision of something other than the terrible worlds to which she was exposed; it also provided a space where she could experience herself in different, positive ways. A critical analysis that has been made in regard to Cliff's garden is particularly pertinent to Bessie Head's work:

This is a new terrain, a new location, in feminist poetics. Not a room of one's own, not a fully public or collective self, not a domestic realm - it is a space in the imagination which allows for the inside, the outside, and the liminal elements inbetween (sic). Not a romanticized pastoral nor a modernist urban utopia - Cliff's garden is the space where writing occurs without loss or separation. It is 'next-to', or juxtaposed, to the other plots of postmodern fictions and realities...It points towards a rewriting of the connections between different parts of the self in order to make a world of possibilities out of the experience of displacement (C. Kaplan 1990, 367-8).

Because Bessie Head saw herself as a 'displaced outsider', her involvement in the land and its transformation into her writing gave her a sense of connection with the land, with nature, and with the people she was involved with during the course of her work. Her personal involvement infuses what appears to be a change of direction, a more outward looking perspective in her later work. This continues the deeply personal concerns characteristic of her earlier work as part of an ongoing process through which she was able to reconstruct loneliness and desolation as beauty, meaning and purpose. This in turn enabled her, as she stood on the horizon between 'living life' and 'living death', to move towards the former by locating herself more directly in her immediate external environment and its history. Thus her social history *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, commissioned by Penguin in 1972 for their World Community Series, focused on the life of Serowe villagers and of certain significant characters who were instrumental in the life of the village. Bessie Head said:

Actually when I started the Serowe book, I chose it deliberately as an antidote to POWER. Later it became valuable to me due to the way I patched it, how much people achieved for themselves and it has given me the feeling of how a whole social order is built up and organised, the things they make for their lives (4.1.1974 KMM BHP).

The catalyst for writing *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind*, which began the new direction in Bessie Head's creative life, was a letter from an English family requesting information about their great grandfather, the missionary John MacKenzie, who had worked among the Bamangwato people for many years. Villagers directed her to the London Missionary Society church and the priest there gave her a pamphlet, '100 Years of Christianity among the Bamangwato' which she read before posting it on to the family. The book she went on to write is divided into three chronological sections, with three major figures from Botswana social life chosen because of 'their responses to the adverse pressures of their times' (xiv, SVRW) and of interviews with the people of Serowe concerning religion, education, self-sufficient skills, the kgotla, transport and the breakdown of family life, traditional medicine and the establishment of modern practices including an antenatal clinic, education, the building of Moeng College.

The first section of the book is concerned with the era of Khama the Great, and includes oral testimony from, among others, the very old men of the tribe, in their eighties and nineties. Part Two of the book moves on to the era of Tshekedi Khama, who fought constantly against the British colonial authorities whilst providing the impetus for education within the community which led to the building of primary schools in Serowe. The third section centres on Patrick van Rensburg, himself a South African refugee who appears as 'the Eugene man' in *A Question of Power*, and, who, having worked in the South African Diplomatic Service, knew the workings of South Africa from the inside. He was able to continue Tshekedi Khama's work

in order to put into practice educational theories which would benefit everyone in the village. He did this through the Swaneng Hill projects and the Brigades, the small factory units functioning under the slogan 'earn while you learn'. These aimed to cover their own educational costs whilst training their members in skills such as printing, stonemasonry, and carpentry. *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* was written at the peak of the Boiteko project's development in Serowe, and thereafter it went into decline. At its height, however, the social activities and the crafts that were made on the project, the physical labour and the growing of food provided a resource base for generating both collective and personal power, and enabled the workers to have a measure of control over their own lives and the means to provide for themselves, both issues of intense personal relevance to Bessie Head.

The causes championed by Bessie Head's three heroes Khama III, Tshekedi Khama and Patrick van Rensburg were thus those close to her own heart, and her interweaving of themes unique to life in Serowe absorbed her, and involved her not only in the lives of these men of purpose, but also of others in the village and beyond into the whole area of Southern Africa. By harnessing work on the land, the everydayness of village life, its projects, the oral testimony of its inhabitants and the history of Southern Africa, and weaving them together into her own work Bessie Head became, as their instrument, more a part of village life, and by extension, of Botswana. That she felt just how significant this book was for her life is evident in her introduction, in which she says 'It was by chance that I

came to live in this village. I have lived most of my life in shattered little bits. Somehow, here, the shattered bits began to grow together' (x, SVRW). Here she uses an organic metaphor to describe the process of her 'living life' in Botswana. *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* testifies to the love she had come to feel, though perhaps not consistently, towards Serowe and its people; the Serowe she writes of in this book bears little resemblance to the frightening world of *A Question of Power*. Throughout its writing Bessie Head fully intended to leave Serowe for Norway. Upon its completion she could no longer contemplate leaving: 'After work like that I belong here. This is my home. Why the hell should I go anywhere else?' (12.5.1974 KMM BHP). She was to remain based in the village and, although she travelled extensively, it made her 'heart very uneasy' (17.12.1979 KMM BHP) on the occasions when she had to leave it.

In Bessie Head's final work, *A Bewitched Crossroad*, the facts beloved of Gilbert and Makhaya merge with a fictional story. As Craig MacKenzie points out, she was 'clearly fascinated by Botswana's unusual history...The emphasis is ultimately upon the uniqueness of Botswana in Southern African history and the role of Khama the Great in this historical process' (1989, 46). Khama III reversed 'the tide that had swallowed up and submerged other black peoples in southern Africa' (xiv, SVRW) and his philosophy has been encapsulated in a law still existing in Botswana 'The lands of the Bamangwato are not saleable' (xiv, SVRW). For her final work, *A Bewitched Crossroad*, Bessie Head used a fictionalized history of Southern Africa. She said that 'Once I started my Khama research I felt I belonged finally

(14.8.1976 KMM BHP). In this novel she examines the historical forces operating in Southern Africa. Her last work focuses on the trials and conflicts of the Sebina clan during the years 1800 to 1895 in which she charts historical events, though not always chronologically. Moving back and forth between the years, she often draws upon a European mode of describing an African peoples' search for an identity and a homeland:

Their final destination was obscure, except that they sought independent territory of their own. As they turned their gaze towards those mysterious dreaming mountains and flat open plains, they did not know then that the spirit of Ulysses moved them as a people (9 BC).

One of the things that fascinated Bessie Head so much about the history of the tribe is their separations and migrations across time and territory: 'It is said that Tswana means to come or go out from one another; to separate; to be the offshoots or separatists from the main Sotho stock to which they originally belonged' (40 BC). It was *A Bewitched Crossroad* that brought Bessie Head's published work to an end. Although she planned to write an autobiography, she said prophetically:

I like my last chore. I am working on early southern African History. Most of it is of such personal benefit to me that I have never enjoyed writing as much as I do now. I am mainly working on the land question, the manner in which the people lost the land. They never lost the land in Botswana (26.7.1978 KMM 24 BHP).

Throughout her work Bessie Head struggled to make good her own losses and to establish a 'living life' which, in her final works, she located first in Serowe, then in Southern African history. She felt that:

Botswana cannot be viewed outside the context of Southern African history as a whole with which it is deeply involved. There are many categories of horror that one has to deal with when considering Southern African history during its earlier period - the settlement of the Dutch at the Cape in 1652, the sudden eruption of tribal violence

in the early nineteenth century known as the Mfecane or period of intertribal wars...Botswana was a cross-road where all three factors meet (180, SVRW).

The crossroad upon which she described Botswana as standing was one of the many spatial metaphors Bessie Head used throughout her writing, and was symbolic of a protective space in that

...all the forces of greed and colonialism passed through. It was the road to the north for Cecil Rhodes and the British but it survived intact. In African custom herbs and medicines were always put around for protection. So the title would be used in this enchanting, figurative sense - it survived by "witchcraft" - but you know what I mean by that - by sheer luck and accident (24.2.1979 KMM BHP).

Through a combination, then, of sheer luck and accident and sheer stiff work Bessie Head was able to move from living in South Africa 'like most black South Africans, an urban slum dweller who survived precariously, without a sense of roots, without a sense of history' (Eilersen 1989, 8) to a bewitched crossroad where she became a writer of international reputation.

Bessie Head's apparent shift away from the personal has been construed critically as the result of an integration in both her personality after her 'breakdown', and into the community after a period of alienation. Evidence for this view is often cited as the often quoted lines of *A Question of Power* 'As she fell asleep she placed one soft hand over her land' (206) and that after the publication of this book she appeared to move away from personal preoccupations into the social and historical arenas of her final works, she remained very firmly embedded within her narratives, and continued to articulate her own intensely personal

experience within them in order to 'explain the hurt people felt at the loss of everything, including the land in Africa' (20.12.1975 KMM BHP). This, of course, included her own very personal losses. Bessie Head offers no answers as to how Botswana avoided the fate of the rest of South Africa:

The ten-year period of the founding of the British Bechuanaland Protectorate was the most exciting part of its history, but it became one of the debates of history. What made the British Bechuanaland Protectorate a land of 'peace and rest' under direct rule from London? It remained so throughout its history. Was it the visit of the three chiefs to London? Was it the prestige of the person of Khama? It was said of him that he was the only black man with a voice in Britain during the scramble for Africa and the early colonial period. Was it the failure of the Jameson raid? (195-6 BC).

Whatever the answer to these questions, it was clear that

The land eluded the colonial era. The forces of the scramble for Africa passed through it like a huge and destructive storm but a storm that passed on to other lands. It remained black man's country. It was a bewitched crossroad. Each day the sun rose on a hallowed land (196 BC).

The land itself meshed with Bessie Head's work on the land and her connection to the natural world. The familiarity and routine associated with work on the land and the rhythms of nature could dispel anxiety and 'I like routine, the weather, the sunrise and going to the same spot every day, depending on whether that spot is hallowed ground' (1.9.1973 KMM BHP). That Bessie Head had come to live in a land she came to see as hallowed and protected, saved from the fate of the land in which she was born, was of great significance to her sense of 'living life'.

I mentioned in my last letter that I was happy here already and to a certain extent I was picking up the threads of that happiness in the last book I wrote about Serowe, which traced its history and life right back to the year 1893. I built up my own approach of solid achievement and that very approach made people co-operate with me. It was a project together with the community and I pieced together all sorts of threads which make up a very beautiful world (5.7.1974 KMM BHP).



## CHAPTER NINE

### WRITING AND RESISTANCE

*Let me tell a story now (A Woman Alone, Autobiographical Writings selected and edited by Craig MacKenzie, Heinemann 1990, 5).*

*Perhaps I'm just having nightmares. Whatever my manifold disorders are, I hope to get them sorted out pretty soon, because I've just got to tell a story (Tales of Tenderness and Power, Ad. Donker 1989, 18).*

In this chapter I want to examine how Bessie Head's writing operated as a method of resistance against the forces which threatened her survival, and how it also operated as a means of survival itself. Two questions assert themselves in this context: what constitutes survival and what constitutes resistance. These are questions Bessie Head both asks and answers throughout her writings as she struggles against the existential states which were a part of the 'living death' imposed upon her by the dominant group who would have preferred her not to exist at all. Since she continued to survive, she experienced constraints upon her being which represented a form of imprisonment, suffocating in its nature and ultimately threatening death. These states, however, are both complex and paradoxical, since they can not only destroy but also offer safety from destruction.

The sense of imprisonment Bessie Head both wrote and spoke about consisted not only of elements from her personal background and the burden of history she carried, but also the physical and political constraints that were their corollary. By describing them in her work she

could define the prisons in which others attempted to confine her, and in defining them, she could not only begin to understand them but also to adopt strategies to escape them. Many other women writers from different backgrounds have experienced a sense of imprisonment from which they have attempted to escape by creatively utilising whatever opportunities are available to them. This is evident in the metaphors and tropes used in their work, for example, in the novel *Longlive!* by the contemporary Afrikaans writer Menan du Plessis, kites fly high and free above a besieged city (1989, 171). In Elsa Joubert's novel *To Die at Sunset*, netting is tied so that it gives the appearance of 'running before the wind' as a ship's sail with its image of the wind of freedom blowing (1982, 5). Imprisoned by race, gender, historical and personal circumstances Bessie Head was, in a sense, a political prisoner, and although she did not experience the torture and death sentences that many political activists lived with, the emotional and psychological damage she sustained was great. According to Chesler (1974), any protest women make against their status is likely to be expressed more in depression, illness and withdrawal rather than in rebellion or action, for women writers, the act of writing itself may be one of resistance or rebellion. Indeed, some of Fanon's (1965) theories concerning the responses of colonized peoples to oppression have been adopted and adapted by Elaine Showalter (1991) with specific reference to women writers. Both suggest that, for oppressed people, there is an initial imitation of the prevailing mode of the dominant tradition, its standards of art and its social roles. This evolves into a second phase wherein the 'minority' groups protest against

these standards and values, demanding autonomy and immersing themselves in their group. This, in turn, gives way to a third phase in which, for Fanon, the writer 'turns himself into an awakener of the people' (179), his literature becomes a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature and a national literature. While Fanon's position is an overtly political one, Showalter's is more personal and is concerned with self-discovery, and a search for identity.

The difficulties experienced under colonization are compounded for women of colour, who are frequently referred to as being doubly colonized, but all women embody the old feminist maxim 'the personal is the political' which is, as Catherine MacKinnon has said, not a simile, not a metaphor, and not an analogy. Rather

it means that women's distinctive experience as women occurs within that sphere that has been socially lived as the personal - private, emotional, interiorized, particular, individuated, intimate - so that what it is to know the politics of women's situation is to know women's lives (1982, 534).

MacKinnon's definition may be seen as only of relevance to western women.

For example, Barbara Harlow suggests that

Whereas the social and the personal have tended to displace the political in western literary and cultural studies, the emphasis in the literature of resistance is on the political as the power to change the world. The theory of resistance literature is in its politics (1987, 30).

Set against this statement, it would be difficult to interpret Bessie Head's writing as resistance writing. Yet, as a South African woman with a European mother and a black father Bessie Head embodied politics. This is not altered by the fact that she did not choose to write herself out of

her prisons in a way that complied with what is generally seen as resistance literature, fighting literature. Indeed, her lack of compliance with what is seen as such brought Bessie Head a certain amount of criticism. As a South African woman of colour she was under particular pressure to take some sort of conventional political stance. She felt that the international community was

so obsessed with South Africa that I have often faced hostile audiences who have exclaimed impatiently: "Why were you invited? You are not a politically committed writer. Why don't you go and liberate the people of South Africa?" (Why Do I Write, undated ms. KMM BHP).

She was also criticized for not being a political writer by Lewis Nkosi who accused her of being politically ignorant most of the time (1981, 99). Bessie Head felt such criticism keenly, saying that

Early in my writing career I made it known that politics was not my concern. But I carry this around with me like a sin. To be South African born you have to be a politician, you have to be a liberator. You cannot stand aloof and not comment on the horror, the horror ('Why Do I Write', undated ms. KMM BHP).

Bessie Head would have preferred to 'stand aloof' since the prospect of political involvement presented her with the threat of imprisonment and death she was already afraid of. She said that her unhappy childhood experiences left her with 'such a delicate nervous balance that when faced with danger or secret activity I tremble violently' ('Why Do I Write', undated ms. KMM BHP). Moreover, she said 'I don't like the heat of the day, the bloody, bloody world of present day Africa. I don't want politicians persecuting me so I don't think I could write about the hot issues of Botswana or elsewhere' (22.3.1982 KMM BHP). Nevertheless, she was unavoidably affected by the very politics she detested, and she

described this in the experience of Elizabeth, in *A Question of Power*, who 'In spite of her inability to like or to understand political ideologies, she had also lived the back-breaking life of all black people in South Africa' (19 QP). Because of this, it was both inevitable and necessary that she respond in some way, whether this was through the passivity and withdrawal of Mouse or the vocalization and madness of Elizabeth.

There were a number of reasons why Bessie Head did not respond by directly addressing political issues in her writing. One was because she never felt she belonged there, and hence she felt unable to write much about South Africa. Nor did she feel she had the right to speak for others there, saying 'I found it difficult to be broadly representative of all the people. It was difficult to know all the people and their everyday chitchat and hopes and longings' (26.7.1978 KMM BHP). She had also, of course, been excluded from conventional politics in South Africa because of her race and colour. Her later life in Botswana also precluded any political involvement since she was a refugee there for many years. Thus, like Makhaya in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, she felt that 'Not any politics in the world meant anything to him as a stateless person, and every political discussion was a mockery, he felt, of his own helplessness' (82 RC). There were also other dangers; for example, Makhaya feels that political involvement would necessitate an opening up, a generosity and fellow feeling that would be dangerous for his precarious sense of himself. He is aware of:

everything that he felt was keeping the continent of Africa at a standstill...He saw this mass of suffering mankind of which he was a

part, but he also saw himself as a separate particle, too, and as time went on he began to stress his own separateness, taking this as a guide that would lead him to clarity of thought in all the confusion (80 RC).

Makhaya had, like his creator, an intense need to protect himself from the invasion of others which meant that a conventionally political stance was impossible for him.

Nevertheless, although Bessie Head claimed that she 'only recorded the life of rural people and not the new politics which does not interest me at all' (26.7.1978 KMM BHP) she did not appear to be entirely politically inactive. Indeed, her exit permit from South Africa, which did not allow her to return to the country, appears to be connected to her brief membership of the Pan African Congress. After she had moved to Botswana, she said that she wrote to the Botswana government indicating her unwillingness to pay taxes because of the way refugees were treated:

Everyone says you don't take on governments when you are a refugee. The important thing is I'll see what can be done while I'm still alive. Every single South African and Rhodesian refugee is sick and neurotic due to the handouts they get from the World Council of Churches, the self-employment that breaks down! No jobs, because they are all for Botswana citizens. So why can't I take it on for all of them? I am just the same (31.7.1975 KMM BHP).

Although Bessie Head felt capable of acting politically in practical ways such as this, she did not feel able to translate political action into her writing in any way which would deflect criticism from her in this regard. Yet the value of overtly political literature has been questioned by, for example, Italo Calvino, who points out that literature has a modest impact on politics. He feels that 'The struggle is decided on the basis of

general strategic and tactical lines and relative strengths; in this context a book is a grain of sand' (1987, 87). Moreover, he suggests that a 'revolutionary' work of art is taken over in a short time by the middle classes and thereby neutralized' (1987, 86). Calvino is critical of possible political uses for literature:

The first is to claim that literature should voice a truth already possessed by politics; that is, to believe that the sum of political values is the primary thing, to which literature must simply adapt itself. This opinion implies a notion of literature as ornamental and superfluous, but it also implies a notion of politics as fixed and self-confident: an idea that would be catastrophic. I think that such a pedagogical function for politics could only be imagined at the level of bad literature and bad politics (1987, 97).

Bessie Head's notion of politics could never be fixed and self-confident, and neither could her writing, as its contradictory nature testifies. Indeed, she said 'I prefer my lack of self-confidence and even deliberately cultivate it. A lot of the problems of humanity start from the ego and what we think we need and must have because within we are too important to ourselves' (28.11.1972 KMM BHP). Nevertheless, she fully understood the power of writing and its impact upon societies and that writers could have a long-term impact, saying 'Now you as the storyteller are going to shape the future' (quoted in MacKenzie & Clayton 1989, 14). In a paper she presented at the Gaborone Writers' Workshop in 1976 she said 'writers of all kinds, whether novelists, poets or dramatists, are mirrors of the times in which they live' (2-4.4.1976 KMM BHP). As such, it is inevitable that they will reproduce the influences upon them whatever their origins. But they are also interpreters of such times, and as such

are in a position to turn their work into a force for change. Bessie Head did not present her views in any pedagogical way, but rather she incorporated her political vision, which arose from her personal awareness of oppression and exploitation and her belief in the possibility of change, into her writing in a subtle, even subversive way, while nevertheless making her intentions clear. Her epigraph to *The Cardinals* testifies to her desire to alter the world she found herself in and the purpose her characters served. She says that the Cardinals are 'in the astrological sense...those who serve as the base or foundation for change'. Her characters serve as this base, as personifications of oppression, as well as instruments of resistance, and they articulate the situation in which she found herself:

I felt that what was getting at me was a world of power. It was getting at me in a hidden way, in a very violent way...in my own way I acknowledged that world of power. I made Maru a personality of power and then quietly stepped behind him and manipulated him (20.6.1980 KMM BHP).

Although Bessie Head felt that 'It's no longer South Africa and protest writing. It's myself and myself alone that I have to present' (xii C), personal questions were, for her, also political and social ones, perceived in accordance with her past knowledge and experiences.

The strategy Bessie Head chose to both protect herself from what she feared might happen to her, as well as to articulate her experiences in what was a broadly political arena was that of written communication. It was her belief that writing should transcend any boundary:

One should be concerned with creating a better world and that no political or religious philosophy has the total answer, that either



individuals or mankind will always be creatively rich and diverse in their expression...like the tower of Babel ( 11.9.1978 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head made clear the significance of writing as a survival strategy during her early years in Botswana, when she wrote from the refugee hut in Francistown that

'My plan is this. I shall just have to get SOMETHING written. While I am here...I am determined to survive...And if writing can open some doors of dignity and respect which I so badly need; then I shall very soon open up a way for myself (quoted in Vigne 1991, 44-45).

Writing was too much an inherent part of her intention to stay alive, a desperate endeavour in which, if she was to succeed, she had 'Got to find a level of survival' (13). Her level of survival was achieved by writing herself out of the 'living death'. Later, when Bessie Head's writing career was established, and after the experiences she recounted in *A Question of Power* she continued to recognize its importance for her survival, saying 'I am anxious not to fall back into the hell I've been through over the past year, so I continue working this side, hoping to bash myself into writing shape with the historical stories' (28.5.1977 KMM BHP). Her awareness that her writing was being read by others was not only tangible evidence both to herself and to others that she had indeed survived. It also gave her hope that help might be at hand:

It's just that I have a desperate need to communicate and it may be that a stranger somewhere would comprehend my suffering and help me. That is why I am putting down everything. Even if I am insane, at least someone could help me to accept and I should have peace of mind (quoted in Vigne 1991, 4-6).

Nevertheless, even Bessie Head's writing life was not without its difficulties; she often felt that she was 'working for everyone for free,

the tax people, the publishers and everyone' (8.7.1975 KMM BHP). Problems with publishers and agents resulted in much heated correspondence which centre on what Ellersen refers to as one of her 'obsessive preoccupations', that of 'dishonest agents'. This was, in her view, indicative of Bessie Head's 'mental instability' (1996, 256), but simply indicates that she had no reason to trust anyone in a world which had never given her any reason to do otherwise. Writing was also an arduous business for her; she said that writing a chapter was 'rather like taking a slow journey from Serowe to Maun by ox-wagon' (Undated letter KMM BHP). Despite this, she said that a period when she decided to bring her writing career to an end 'made me feel quite ill' (14.7.1975 KMM BHP). Nor was her writing free from the dangers of political involvement. This is evident in her feelings about her classification as a Black writer, a category into which she was placed once she became highly visible to a reading public. As public interest in Black writers grew, she became both resentful as well as fearful of the risk of exploitation, saying 'There is a slight mixed up accident about my own writing. First they put my black face on the cover and they have been selling that for some time, primarily my blackness' (Undated letter KMM BHP). She viewed the enthusiasm with which she was thus labelled with distress, saying 'Something tortures me slightly. I am dependent on an audience, seemingly hungry to comprehend the 'real Africa' and over eager to take a writer as the epitome of everything African' (22.12.1972 KMM BHP). She felt this threatened her with further imprisonment within the classification by others which was a form of the 'living death' she feared, saying: 'I would dread to be faced with the dark dungeon called the

"proper" and recognisable African and this should be the standard character one would find in an African novel' ('Why Do I Write', undated ms. KMM BHP). Bessie Head opposed the constraints of racial stereotyping which she felt included what she saw as the prevailing view that 'only certain kinds of writers could properly represent the African personality' ('Why Do I Write', undated ms KMM BHP). She said:

I wonder if they know what African is, if limitations can be placed on the African personality. But this insistence on a nationalistic attitude, that one had to be black and African to be a writer was flung at me all the time...I was a story teller before I was an African with a special writing technique, that of the broad horizon view of the born story teller (3.9.1982 KMM BHP).

Here, Bessie Head defines her own identity as a story teller as predating her identity as an African, new or otherwise, and this also militated against her wanting to be identified specifically as a Botswana writer:

I am only deeply frightened now because I fear I half created in my writing a sense that I was identified with the country. That is not so. It will produce its own Botswana writers. I was only looking for a brief sense of identity with Africa but not in the vicious, narrow, tribal sense of the word (26.7.1978 KMM BHP).

Any form of creativity may provide a catalyst for action, a means of survival and Mouse, in *The Cardinals*, as an artist as well as a writer, elicits from Johnny the advice 'While you look at that town with the eye of an artist, look at it also with the eye of a writer and let there be no difference between the artist and the writer' (135 C). However, even in creativity lay the danger of control by others. Bessie Head felt that the perils of power politics in any form had a detrimental effect upon her writing, saying 'When I think of writing any single thing I panic and go

dead inside. Perhaps it's because I have my ear too keenly attuned to the political lumberjacks who are busy making capital on human lives' (18, TTP). Sexual politics are another dangerous area, as is particularly evident when Johnny in *The Cardinals* attempts to completely take over Mouse, saying:

I can help you faster than you might be able to help yourself. I can help you to be the kind of writer you want to be, but there are certain conditions which go with my offer...That you give me complete control to guide and direct you the way I think you should go, and that you come and live with me' (71-2 C).

Margaret Cadmore in *Maru* has a brief but intense period of creativity which is important to her survival. Speaking of the picture she has painted, she says 'I want it for myself. It is the only record I have of something which profoundly affected my life' (116 M). However, Margaret's creative work is taken from her by Maru, because he feels her pictures also have meaning for his own life. For him 'They were a companionship between the present and the time when he was ready to live a different life' (105 M). Thus, while the creative act may represent a 'living life' to its creator, its results may be appropriated by others to meet their own needs and serve their own ends. While Margaret Cadmore is aware of the importance of her art as symbolic of her attempt to engage with the 'living life' and its implications for her sense of identity, her struggle to retain it is brief and soon over. It was Bessie Head's intention to resist being overpowered in any way, including by conventional politics, and her apparent lack of a political viewpoint and her resistance to all

attempts to categorize her make it difficult to place her in African literature for those to whom such categorization is important.

South African literary history has, of course, been profoundly influenced by Europe. Many South African writers, both white and black, looked to Europe in their search for a literary identity. Many went into exile, sometimes because of their strong feelings against South Africa; some, for example Can Themba and Arthur Nortje, died there. Doris Lessing said that 'all white-African literature is the literature of exile: not from Europe, but from Africa' (quoted in Ward 1989, 1). Though many black South African writers do write in their own languages, for example Zulu, many continue to borrow European forms and to write in English. It is not unusual for writers in postcolonial worlds to use the language and the influence of the colonizers, although Frantz Fanon (1965), writing before the explosion of writing from South Africa and the 'Third World', described such literature as a literary subculture, wherein the writer assimilates the culture of the occupying power. Yet even writers who have borrowed Western forms to such an extent that their work becomes almost a form of parody are not necessarily assimilating or submitting to the dominant culture. For example, in Miriam Tlali's essay 'Sentsumi's Qoqalosi' in the collection *Mihloti* (1984), she describes, apparently without irony, the 'immutable rocky peaks' (65) and 'luscious temperate grasses' (65) where shepherds are frolicking merrily (66). She describes how 'there is no pollution here to besmirch the fragrances from the abounding flora' (66), where 'You are as care-free as the numerous butterflies which flutter their

colourful wings as they fly from corolla to corolla, sucking the sweet nectar' (66). In her short story 'Detour into Detention' she continues in this vein in the words of a youth who has been arrested, and who asks 'What about the psychological, the immeasurable spiritual torture we have been through? Such traumatic experiences!' (41). This clichéd style appears to weaken Tlali's at times powerful prose, which at its best carries considerable emotional impact. However, she describes, in *Mihloti*, a situation which might hold the key to her use of language:

Throughout all my life, I had tried by all means to avoid any confrontation with the police. For a so-called second class citizen who had lived all my life in the city of Johannesburg I had really been fortunate enough to have achieved that unique distinction in a place where it was almost impossible not to be a criminal. I had obeyed almost all the laws of this Republic. All the many unjust laws I had often felt that I was under no moral obligation to honour (1984, 15).

One way of avoiding confrontation, of being criminalized and of therefore taking care of oneself, can be by adopting the language of the colonizers. Tlali epitomizes this strategy in drawing attention to the imposition of forms of language alien to the colonized writer's own experience and, of course, their power to do so.

Bessie Head also strongly desired the avoidance of confrontation, and wanted to remain unnoticed in order to maintain a measure of safety, but she adopted a different strategy. To survive as a creative artist, but also to articulate her own position, she used a creative sleight of hand and in *The Cardinals*, Johnny comments upon this strategy, saying 'Writing reveals quite a lot about the writer. This bit here proves to me that you

are very much alive inside. What makes you conceal this aliveness behind a mask of death?' (42). For Mouse, this mask is that of the 'living death' imposed upon her, but also a defence against physical death, a passive disguise that covers her need for autonomy and power. Death, which is as constant a preoccupation in Bessie Head's work as is imprisonment, can be the ultimate escape from prison, the ultimate release from the 'living death' of oppression and domination. It can also be seen as the ultimate form of passivity. The threat of imminent death occurs in the writing of many South African women writers from different backgrounds. Ana-Paula, in *To Die at Sunset* wakes up beneath the imprisoning confines of a mosquito net to see that it is suspended from a rope and a hook which could be seen to invite her to take her own life. Even her own hair resembles 'an uncoiled rope' (1982, 5) offering the same solution.

Bessie Head had a strong sense of her own mortality, and she felt threatened with death throughout much of her life. She said: 'I've never felt that I've had a very strong hold on life. In fact, I am always amazed when I wake up each morning. I never expect to' (2.7.1974 KMM BHP). On other occasions, she said 'I have lived face to face with death for a whole year' (15.10.1971 KMM BHP), pointing out that 'I do not think I was meant to survive' (7.6.1972 KMM BHP), and feeling that 'I have lived and will no doubt continue to live one of the most gruesome lives it is possible for a human being to live' (21.7.1974 KMM BHP). There is evidence that she tried to end her life by suicide, and in a letter written in 1971 she looked

back to times she felt were simpler:

that was 15 years ago and I was 22. I one morning swallowed 50 sleeping tablets and was forcibly brought back to life by doctors...the inside world of everybody is obscene. Mine was given a significance only to force me to destroy it (2.8.1971 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head's characters epitomize the writer's own dilemmas in this regard. In *The Cardinals*, as I have suggested, Mouse's silence and passivity imply a sense of the 'living death' imposed upon her by others. One way of eluding this is by escape into physical death. Certainly Mouse's mother, Ruby, sought this solution after rejecting Johnny, her lover, because he is a fisherman of 'low social standing' (57), and sending their child to be cared for in a slum. She then:

...walked to the kitchen and selected a small knife with a sharp, thin blade. Concealing it in the palm of her hand, she walked with her long, swift stride to her room and locked the door. With quick, deliberate movements she slashed deep into her wrists... (60 C).

Mouse herself has a 'perpetual suicide mind' (89 C), and is very near physical death on a number of occasions. On the beach with Johnny, for example, she almost drowns: 'For five seconds all he could see was the swirling, tumultuous waves and then the swirling monster that had engulfed her rose again and flung her out some twenty feet ahead of him' (89 C). One interpretation of suicide is that it is a final attempt to exercise power over the body, the final act of resistance. However, in physical death there can be no opportunity to ever achieve a 'living life', thus, suicide might not be an authentic means of resistance since it can be seen as capitulating to the oppressor's wishes. In *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth's death is prophesied many times, and she is also exhorted to



commit suicide as had her mother before her. Nevertheless, like Mouse, she resists death.

While a mask of death was in part imposed upon Bessie Head by others, it was also constructed by the writer herself as a means of protection beneath which she could exercise a subtle, subversive form of resistance, carried out by stealth, and often in disguise in order to ensure her survival. It is clear that, although at times seemingly reconciled to physical death, the process of writing was an acceptable means by which Bessie Head could prolong her life:

Then I decided to die here. I think no further than death and that has solved all my problems because once one is dead they will have nothing to tear to pieces any more. But while one is alive they bend all their efforts on your destruction. This is what I have experienced here. So I thought that one day death would come but in the meantime I'll type out a few more books (3.6.1974 KMM BHP).

To show that one is alive attracts those who want at most to destroy, at best to control her. Control by others was anathema to Bessie Head, and through her writing she was able to exercise control over herself through her creativity, thus affording herself protection:

I told you right from the start that I'd a best seller and MASTERPIECE in MARU...Maru the character is simply adored. I'm on top of the world but so aged and wise now. I've got control of creation itself (6.1.1972 KMM BHP).

Through Bessie Head's writing she could attempt to render a desperate situation controllable; an example of this is shown in her meticulous record keeping and duplication of her letters: 'I also file one to keep hold of certain ideas I have that rush through my mind and get lost'

(20.12.1975 KMM BHP). After the crisis in her life which she transformed into *A Question of Power*, Bessie Head wrote

I have taken up a little work and started some writing again; mostly to build up control. It might not get beyond me. I am rather tortured because many inner assumptions have had the props knocked out of them. We seem to be very dependent on our own personalities to get us through life and build up props; beliefs in our strength, It is hard going just now, because the inside no longer holds me up (3.8.1971 KMM BHP).

Thus, Bessie Head's writing operated as the mask of a 'living death' itself, which she wore as protection against the dangers of her own personal circumstances and her historical place within South Africa, protecting her from those who would extinguish her 'living life'. Turning, like Scheherazade, to telling stories in order to survive, she was also able to use writing as part of a disguise to enable her to elude the 'living death'. This is evident in her use of the metaphor of borrowed clothing to describe the process of her 'search as an African for a sense of historial continuity, a sense of roots, but I remember how tentative and sketchy were my first efforts, not finding roots as such but rather putting on layer after layer of patchy clothing' (quoted in Eilersen 1989, 8). She also said that 'for the purposes of my trade, I borrowed the clothes of a country like Botswana' (142-3 TTP) and she felt that 'Writing is very much a matter of having clothes...I very gradually put on some clothes here' (22.5.1974 KMM BHP). The different clothes Bessie Head wore, then, were made up of all the different labels she embodied, and the different environments she inhabited. These clothes are not necessarily

solely synonymous with the writer, who attempts to protect herself beneath their patchy, borrowed layers.

The political significance of Bessie Head's writing is paradigmatic of the terms that Calvino sets down as vital:

Literature is necessary to politics above all when it gives a voice to whatever is without a voice, when it gives a name to what as yet has no name, especially to what the language of politics excludes or attempts to exclude. I mean aspects, situations, and languages both of the outer and of the inner world, the tendencies repressed both in individuals and in society. Literature is like an ear that can hear things beyond the understanding of the language of politics...Simply because of the solitary individualism of his work, the writer may happen to explore areas that no one has explored before, within himself or outside, and to make discoveries that sooner or later turn out to be vital areas of collective awareness (1987, 98).

The widespread interest that has been aroused by Bessie Head's work testifies to its importance in this context. Indeed, she embodied Calvino's definitions. The conditions imposed upon her by the dominant group aimed to render her not only permanently voiceless and nameless but also simultaneously having to cope with what Trinh T. Minh-Ha calls 'the pain and frustration of having to live a difference that has no name and too many names already' (1991, 14). However, in writing from this position, it may be that she produced literature of a greater value than that which is overtly political, since it is more likely to reach those who would not ordinarily read it. Calvino asks:

given the division of the world into a capitalist camp and a proletarian camp, an imperialist camp and a revolutionary camp, whom is the writer writing for? Answer: he writes for the one side and the other. Every book - not only of literature, and even if 'addressed' to someone - is read by its addressees and by its enemies. It is perfectly possible that the enemies might learn more from it than the addressees (1987, 86).

Bessie Head felt that she was able to use the talents she had, whether in her published or her personal writing, to effect change. This is evident in a letter she wrote to Robert Sobukwe where she says:

I guess your mail is censored but sometimes possibly the censor could be in need of some education in philosophical matters and many other things so if you could write to me, and I to you, we might improve the mental outlook of your censor (6.1.1972 KMM BHP).

Calvino says that 'The work itself is and has to be a battleground' (1987, 88). Bessie Head's writing was a battleground on many fronts, including that of her internal life and its interface with her external life in Southern Africa. The way in which she was able to discipline herself to direct her energies and her determination to survive, whether through her work on the land or her transformation of her experiences into her writing, was almost military in its rigour. She makes this clear in her suggestion that 'There's more than 16 years of a soldier's life behind me and rough pot cooking' (Some Notes of Advice to Young Writers, undated ms. KMM BHP). Olive Schreiner was another writer who felt the importance of work for survival was paramount, and expressed its importance in military terms, saying

Life, personal life, is a great battlefield. Those who enter it must fight. Those who enter it and will not fight get riddled with bullets. The only thing for them is to keep out of it and have no personal life (1978, 3).

The personal and the political are however inextricable, and there are many ways to engage in battle. Bessie Head felt that 'Every oppressed man [sic] has this suppressed violence, as though silently waiting the time to set right the wrongs that afflict him' (142 TTP).

Bessie Head often felt that there was only one way of ending the oppression with which she was familiar: 'one day all those millions of unarmed people would pitch themselves bodily on the bullets, if that was the only way of ridding themselves of an oppressor' (133-4 RC). Not only was Bessie Head honest about her own lack of ability to fight in this way, she also saw how such a form of resistance might also be a form of suicide which, like any other means of dying, could be engineered by the oppressor:

all the pattern and play of destiny unfolded before the Long Profile and his role in it and my role in it and the other giants who all worked to make up the soul of God. There was one thing Long Profile did after this insight. He turned round and tried to kill me, not by his hand but by my own hand, to force me into committing suicide (undated KMM BHP).

Bessie Head was able to transform the otherwise suppressed violence which was the response to her experiences into the energy that fuelled her writing. Foucault points out that there are three types of struggle - 'against forms of domination...against forms of exploitation', and against subjection, 'that which ties the individual to himself' (1982, 212). Bessie Head's writing encompasses all of these. There were areas of her life in which she had no choice other than to submit to domination, exploitation and subjection. As a subjected being she was aware of the necessity of submitting to a higher authority and that she had little choice but to accept her limitations to do anything about it. However, she was able to accept that she was also a free subject, and nowhere was this more apparent than in her life as a writer. When she asks 'let me tell a story now' (quoted in Mackenzie 1990, 5) she is, as representative of dominated,

subjected and exploited human beings everywhere, asking permission to do so of history, of the society and of the continent that in part created her. However, that she is able to formulate and voice this question at all suggests that it is rhetorical, and that she intends to proceed regardless of any answer she may receive. In this way she indicates her ability to assert her free subjectivity and thus to resist the living death' and to claim that it was her right to do so.

According to Joyce Johnson:

*A Bewitched Crossroad* may also be seen as the final in a series of experiments with mixing literary genres. *A Question of Power* and *Maru* are two successful experiments with literary form. *A Bewitched Crossroad* is best appreciated as an attempt to combine elements from different genres and different literary traditions and to reflect in a text the nature of the synthesis taking place in the writer's mind (1990, 131-2).

Bessie Head's writing was itself a synthesis of all the cross-currents of literature and history to which she was exposed. It also functioned as a method of survival, of establishing a 'living life' and of resisting a 'living death':

A book or books are an accumulation of living observation. Sometimes one gives one's all in a few books. Sometimes a damn [sic] wants to burst and then the great masterpiece or masterpieces come pouring out. I can never tell with myself as I live on a very violent cycle. I tend to crash right down to rock bottom where nothing exists and suddenly take a violent and unexpected upward swing. The two pivots are absolutely necessary for me, not peaceful even-keel day to day work. I have to pause and drop. Sometimes I have to wait and wait until I can control my material (Undated notes on Camara Laye and Exile KMM BHP).

Her writing was also a form of autobiography as survival writing. It has

been suggested that autobiography is a:

rehabilitative activity, a learning of how to walk again. More fundamental than the body's readjustments to the prosthesis or crutch, walking again requires a new sense of the ground, a trust that the ground will hold up and not give way (Varner Gunn 1992, 76).

Bessie Head's unconventional form of autobiography was more than this, however. For her, it was creating the ground itself. For Virginia Woolf, writing was 'a strip of pavement over an abyss' (quoted in Benstock 1988, 28). Bessie Head, constantly aware of the possibility of her own abyss of personal and historical circumstances, felt on one hand that she could accept 'the possibility of the abyss because in real life one is granted very little comfort or certainties' (25.6.1973 KMM BHP). On the other, she was able to provide herself with her own 'strip of pavement' by transforming every facet of her existence into her writing.

Bessie Head's writing, with all the constant contradictions and oppositions, allowed her, through her particular fusion of fiction and autobiography, to enter into the process of deconstructing the self others had imposed upon her and of creating and consolidating 'a fiduciary ground that holds the self in place, recovery of that ground after it has been lost' (Varner Gunn 1992, 76). She strongly identified with the role of the writer and its importance, saying 'I have always reserved a special category for myself, as a writer -- that of a pioneer blazing a new trail into the future' (Role of the Writer in Africa, 1976 KMM BHP). This 'special category' gave her a sense of dignity, an identity as a writer independent of those identities imposed upon her by others as well as the

power of the creative artist to use her voice to assert her right to a 'living life'. It was also a means of focusing upon her fears and upon the 'living death' that threatened to silence her.

Writing also enabled Bessie Head to survive on a practical economic level, since she was dependent on her earnings as a writer for much of her livelihood. Agnes Sam points out that:

Any woman forced to live in an environment where she is a foreigner, and then frustrated in her attempts to find employment will find herself in the isolated world that leaves writing as an only option. Since she can't make a living in any other way, she will hope to make writing pay (quoted in Petersen & Rutherford 1986, 93).

Although this is a very generalized statement, it held good for Bessie Head, who, with the proceeds of her first published novel, was able to build the small house which she called 'Rain Clouds' that stands on the outskirts of Serowe, and where she remained until her death in 1986. Her attachment to the house that was created from the proceeds of her writings was so strong that by the time she had found another country to move to, she decided against it, saying:

Could not face the thought of Norway...because I love my little house and everything around it. I mean I built my house myself and where would I get it again. It looks like me and I cannot part with it as it may be the only home I ever own in my life' (5.8.1974 KMM BHP).

She had by this time established sufficient a sense of place in Serowe to feel that:

I don't know where to go where I could cope with life on my own. I could not cope with Norway, I know, or anywhere else, so I just don't know where to go because I don't have the means and would only be dependent on help...so the best I can do in the meantime is make myself happy with immediate chores (20.12.1975 KMM BHP ).



It was in Botswana where Bessie Head not only wrote most of her books but also where she made writing into as much an organic part of her existence as her work on the land:

It was almost as if the novels wrote themselves, propelled into existence by the need to create a reverence for human life in an environment and historical circumstances that seems to me a howling inferno. Thus, all my earlier work was concerned with stating personal choices and there was an anxiety in them that those personal choices be the right ones. Manipulated, manipulated characters talk anxiously for the author (Ms of interview for Drum magazine Feb 1982 KMM BHP).

Craig MacKenzie suggests that 'it was in Botswana, in the quiet rhythm of its daily life, and most important, its continuity with the past, that Bessie Head was able to carve out a spiritual as well as a physical home' (1989, 48); but there is evidence that Botswana was to remain a country that at many times she also hated and wanted to leave. While in 1976 she wrote 'Just at present I have a kind of trap, I truly don't know where to go' ( 27.12.1976 KMM BHP) even as late as 1984, two years before her death, she continued to express her ambivalence to the country:

I hate to admit to fate, its bonds and ties but I was never able to leave the bloody country. I was stuck here. For years and years I wrote wild and panic-stricken letters begging ANYONE to help me leave the country because a sense of suffering was so deep and endless. On the other hand I was forced to earn my living from my writing. Serowe became a home I had not planned and my whole development as a writer was worked out here (15.2.1984 KMM BHP).

It was in Serowe, nevertheless, that Bessie Head's writing gave such a sense of meaning and purpose to her life that she was unable to abandon it completely for any other occupation throughout her life. Whether her immediate chores involved her writing or work on the land, or a synthesis

of the two, they were strongly involved in her desire to remain in Serowe, although this never proved an ideal solution to Bessie Head's difficulties.

Bessie Head's novels, then, aimed to balance the world she perceived as a howling inferno of 'living death' with a humanity and a reverence that would impose a 'living life' upon it. Writing was, for her, as much an affirmation of being as it was for Olive Schreiner, of whom First and Scott said that her 'struggles with self-realization sometimes inspired her to write, but at other times prevented her from doing so; her creativity and her failure were expressions of the same struggle' (1980, 18).

Schreiner also identified herself wholly with her work, as is evidenced in a letter to Havelock Ellis in which she said 'I would like to have your critical judgement of my mind, or rather of my work, which is really me' (18). She felt that it was 'only in self-forgetfulness and absorption in that can happiness ever be found' (75). Bessie Head also knew 'how one can get lost in the self, writing wise' (9.10.1975 KMM BHP). Writing was the work with which Bessie Head, threatened with annihilation, affirmed her existence through its transformative powers, its links to her garden, to Botswana, and to a universal reading public. As a solitary practice, it also allowed her the isolation which was necessary for her survival:

When I wrote in my biographical notes that my work became more social and outward looking I do not mean that I want to be accepted by any society. I meant I found some things in Botswana society that earn my respect...I do not hunger for people to accept me. I like a very lonely and solitary life ( 11.8.1982 KMM BHP).

Paradoxically, it also allowed her to reach out of the prison of her isolation, of her experience, and communicate her suffering to others whether or not they shared similar experiences.

The 'living life' Bessie Head found in writing, then, provided her with sufficient a level of self-forgetfulness and absorption to protect herself and to survive. It also presented her with a number of possibilities, many of which were ultimately fulfilled. She became a successful published writer, and earned the majority of her living through her writing. Writing was a means of escape, although such a means was never any less contradictory than the perspectives she expressed within it. It was a form of liberation from the mental hospital surrounded by a high wall (18 QP) where she was born, from the exclusion of living 'on the edge of South Africa's life' (18 QP), from the 'living death' of imprisonment in categories imposed upon her by others, and from fixed states not easily eluded other than in the movement inherent in her writing. It was through her writing that she set her own parameters for existence and constructed for herself a measure of freedom within them. It was also a way she could set out her confusion before both herself and others in an attempt to resolve it:

God, I have travelled so far I don't really know what I am now. I tried to simplify the terrible torment of my life here by writing it down in all its horrific depravity as a kind of appeal in itself, as a kind of final attempt to just simplify my life (22.10.1973 KMM BHP).

She linked the personal to the political in an attempt to create a better world through her writing by honouring her own personal experience in

fictionalized form in the hope that, by comprehending her own personal suffering, she might avoid causing others to suffer:

If I understand the causes of my own pain it prevents me from inflicting pain on others. If I see in myself so clearly and with a shuddering horror the malice, weakness, extreme vulnerability and ignorance, I am frozen, immobile; for each demented face in the battlefield around me is my own face. Where may one flee to escape the destruction? The cause of my pain is that I am an inextricable part of the conflict (143 C).

As an embodiment of the conflict, Bessie Head was unable wholly to escape it. However, through her writing she was able to acknowledge her right to express her own perceptions of her situation and to exert a measure of control over it:

I have earned the right to write only about what I have control over and the howling inferno of hell can go on howling. Perhaps some one else will record its activities from now on but I have other things to do (5.7.1974 KMM BHP).

The 'living death' was never to leave Bessie Head. As late as 1981 she wrote 'I have a personal crisis going - the old one about survival' (26.12.1981 KMM BHP) and her life came to an end in 1986 at the age of 49. Her work remains as the tangible evidence of her struggles and her ability to use her own voice despite almost overwhelming pressure to be silent and invisible. Like, the child artist Isaac, in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, who dies alone at the cattle post but leaves behind his carvings as evidence of his existence, Bessie Head's own writing was a legacy she left to the reading public although at times this may not have been much consolation to her:

It is a bit of a dismal thought - it takes years to acquire a writing technique and years to feel that thoughts, profound and useful are one's own and just at that point one becomes uncertain of how long

one will live...that all the while now you are living on borrowed time  
(5.10.73 KMM BHP).

Nevertheless, through her writing Bessie Head was able to re-classify herself as a 'New African', saying 'Don't worry to define my race. I've defined myself thoroughly in my novels. I am a New African. I like being a pioneer, creating light and space' (10.6.1975 KMM BHP). Only by wholly identifying herself, not as a black writer and not as a woman writer, but simply as a writer, could she strive to remain free from the forms of classification which she felt were imprisoning. Instead, to be a writer allowed her to take a 'broad horizon view'. Her purpose in her life and her art is perhaps best summed up in Sartre's words, 'Human reality remains the prisoner of its unjustifiable facticity, with itself on the horizon of its search, everywhere' (1984, 111). Therein lies much of Bessie Head's importance and subtlety as a writer who gives a voice to those who are disenfranchised, afraid, isolated, who feel that politics exclude them, but whose lives are nevertheless governed by power politics.

For Bessie Head, both the questions she asked and the answers she attempted to give throughout her writing in regard to her place in the world remained fluid and paradoxical. In the end :

In a creative sense I found myself left only with questions. How do we and our future generations resolve our destiny? How do we write about a world long since lost, a world that never seemed meant for humans in the first place, a world that reflected only misery and hate? It was my attempt to answer some of these questions that created many of strange divergences in my own work (quoted in Cecil Abrahams 1990, 12).

## CONCLUSION

'I told them they could kill me, but they could not conquer me' (Khama III quoted in letter 16.5.1980 KMM BHP).

In paying tribute to the African-American writer Michelle Cliff, who sent her a copy of her book *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, Bessie Head wrote:

If there is a troubled undertone in the writing and a preoccupation with the dark times black people have lived through (a sense of having been destroyed in some essential way by contact with white people), that very clarity of language and meaning suggests a control over all experience, an intellectual control that leaves one with a sense of peace, not alarm. I have observed that people who torture and trouble life in a wide radius around them, do so because they cannot come face to face either with their own errors or the errors of history. I think that is the basic magnificence of your own book, that your life depends on coming face to face with your own self. The book has a very apt title. I do not dispute that that identity has been reclaimed (13.10.1981 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head had no need to either reclaim or construct an identity, since she had been given at birth the identity the dominant group decided she should have, and when this changed, it changed in accordance with the wishes of that group. The fusion of historical influences, along with her later social and personal circumstances, became integral aspects of her sense of self in the world into which she had been born. This was a world which was particularly conducive to human misery; indeed, the world of which we are all a part is full of inequity, famine, atrocity. And, as David Smail points out:

human misery, of which psychological distress forms a significant part, does not crop up, as it were, *within* individual people, but arises out of the interaction of people with each other and from the nature of the world we have created (Smail 1984, 1).

Within this world, Bessie Head endured, at least periodically, what

Charles Taylor describes as a state of 'identity crisis',

an acute form of disorientation, which people often express in terms of not knowing who they are, but which can also be seen as a radical uncertainty of where they stand. They lack a frame or horizon within which things can take on a stable significance, within which some life possibilities can be seen as good or meaningful, others as bad or trivial. The meaning of all these possibilities is unfixed, labile or undetermined. This is a painful and frightening experience (Taylor 1989, 27-28).

The painful and frightening experiences Bessie Head endured as part of the 'living death' she had been born into ensured that she 'lived and would no doubt continue to live, one of the most gruesome lives it is possible for a human being to live' (21.7.1974 KMM BHP). Particularly after the terrifying events she recounted in *A Question of Power* she felt:

I lost my sense of privacy due to the extreme distress the experience aroused. I attempted to regain human dignity by recording the experience. The experience was degrading and robbed me of any sense of being human (8.12.1981 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head's responses to her circumstances have led some critics to diagnose either the writer or her characters as schizophrenic in the medical sense of the word. However, it is perhaps R.D. Laing's interpretation of the term in the context of its root meaning of 'schiz', broken or fragmented, and 'phrenos', heart, or soul, thus rendering its literal meaning 'broken-hearted' (Laing quoted in Hinchcliffe 1990, 34), that most clearly illuminates Bessie Head's experiences of the worlds within and around her. However, she chose to accept them, and to accept the history of which she was a part. Charles Olson, believing that 'history and mythology were central to the human experience', saw that a sense of history is not 'an abstract phenomenon, divorced from us in space and time, but...actual energy and active

forces that involve our imagination'. Indeed, he saw life '"as the historical function of the individual"' (Olson, quoted in Charters 1994, 10). Thus, whilst the 'living death' of Bessie Head's experiences and her place in the world was established long before her birth, and was rooted in the history of Southern Africa and later in her birth in the Fort Napier Mental Institution, and informed her subsequent status as a woman of mixed race, both in South Africa and later in Botswana, her life also had its own validity and meaning. While locked into the categories and definitions imposed upon her by more powerful others both historically and personally, she was also locked out of the dominant group and its structures. To be excluded, whilst painful, also allows the individual the possibilities and potential to create their own frame or horizon. Bessie Head's ability to do this was facilitated, rather than hindered, by the 'unfixed, labile' nature of the possibilities open to her. These allowed her sufficient latitude to choose to view her self in a way favourable to her:

...that's all I know about my beginnings. It rather suits my type, the pioneer who likes pushing ahead with completely new dreams though I was very sorry when I knew the circumstances under which I had been born (22.3.1975 KMM BHP).

Lionnet suggests that 'In the texts of Jones and Head, revisions of the cultural script are mediated by a phantasmic resolution of differences, a retreat into the imaginary' (1995, 103) which succeeds 'in constructing an alternative space, a parallel world with utopian possibilities despite the restriction of movement that prison imposes' (104). However, Bessie Head did not retreat into an imaginary world. Rather, she engaged with a very real world in the most effective way she



knew how: by translating the whole range of her experiences into her writing. Her work is too contradictory and paradoxical to ever achieve a resolution which would result in the stasis she fought against as she 'fought free of anything I feel is a prison' (13.12.1977 KMM BHP). Rather than experiencing nothing but the 'living death' of total deracination from the different pasts and cultures to which she was exposed, she created for herself from them a 'living life' through her writing, which provided a horizontal space in which she could survive. In this way, she also empowered herself to move across boundaries and feel a degree of freedom from the categories imposed upon her:

In a part of the world where everyone tends to be placed according to their skin colour, I had the good fortune to be born of unknown parents. People of all races brought me up. Sometimes I feel like an African, sometimes like a German, sometimes like a Zulu. If I could fulfil my purpose at a later date, I shall be the truly international human being (undated letter KMM BHP).

Bessie Head knew that 'If I have sunk to the depths I can also rise to the heights' (116 C) and the meaning and purpose she intended to fulfil through her determination and courage was to assert her humanity through her writing and survive as far as possible on her own terms. All of her writings, then, served to establish her humanity against the forces of those who would extinguish it, and thus prevent her from telling her own story. By using a conventional first person autobiographical form she would have been vulnerable to attack. It would also have brought her face to face with the many distressing elements of her life, and thus stripped her of the defences so necessary to her survival. Instead, she chose to use a third person narrative in order to protect herself, thus ostensibly maintaining the passive,

unconfrontational, apolitical stance which was in keeping with the status imposed upon her. However, writing is not a passive activity, nor was Bessie Head's ability to vocalize her existential dilemmas in a way that enabled her to maintain her horizontal view achieved through taking a passive position. Her choice of a third person narrative allowed her the freedom to blur the boundaries between author, narrator and character, and also enabled her to construct a scaffolding to support her during times when she had few other means of support. For example, on one occasion she said:

It is hard going just now, because the inside no longer holds me up. Indeed, I was watching the end of a complex combination of heaven and hell. It gave me little time to watch myself. Seems like I have the job of building up a totally new Bessie Head if I live long enough to complete the job and earn some peace (3.8.1971 KMM BHP).

Bessie Head was clear about the complex autobiographical nature of her work. Yet, while she transformed places and people she knew into their fictional counterparts, it was not there that the importance of her autobiographical writings lay. Rather, their importance lay in the recurrence of the motifs that defined her life, the distillations of the 'living life' and the 'living death', repeated in a multiplicity of episodes and personified into a number of characters throughout her writings. Her 'living life' and 'living death' were lived out in a 'million different circumstances' (undated letter KMM BHP) within the layered preoccupations that make up her narratives. For example, she articulated how 'the mind picks up on anything to explain the brooding of the heart; sometimes a love affair, sometimes a soul journey to the end of the universe' (16.10.1969 KMM BHP). Sometimes she used

supernatural characters and experiences in order to do this, in part because she inhabited worlds where such presences were not alien to her, but also because 'Upon our sufferings we try to build a personality that excludes ordinary joys, the pursuit of happiness, and that is purely conceptual. We have become incarnated concepts' (Mangakis 1984, 37). Through such methods she empowered herself to take various subject positions within which she could examine and re-examine, state and re-state, re-create and reinvent the various aspects of her life. She could also try out possible answers to the riddle of her life, read what her life was like, how it might change if she were to change. Through the contradictions inherent within her work she maintained a movement against the forces that threatened to fix and imprison her. Her writings thus present a flexible view, a shifting perspective on her life which allowed her to examine the questions she needed to ask at a safe remove, impose artistic control over highly personal and subjective material, and create a distance between herself and her subjects.

The work she engaged in following the publication of *A Question of Power*, whilst ostensibly changing its focus from an interrelationship between her inner life and her life in the world to a concentration on history and social history, continued to embed her strongly personal presence within its narratives and enabled her to continue to explore personal concerns whilst protecting vulnerable areas of herself. After she finished *Serowe, Village of the Rain Wind*, Bessie Head had made sufficient sense of her life by exploring it in her work to realize the futility of moving anywhere else. She said

I did not really want to leave until I had summed this up in some way. What would really happen when I left here would be that a

whole chunk of my life would remain behind because I involved myself in Everything and it does not please me to be some stranger again, lost, distracted (October 1966 KMM BHP).

Instead, she felt she had

...learned that it doesn't matter where a human being lives, as long as his contribution to life is constructive, not destructive. From that approach many beautiful things are awakened in other human beings and a communication begins. It amazes me how simply picking up a spade and digging turns the world into an orderly place. I can't find such order and rightness anywhere else (14.8.1976 KMM BHP).

In fact, she used her pen in exactly the same way as she used the spade, and for the same reasons. Writing gave meaning, purpose and direction to Bessie Head's life. She was able to use it as a device to enable her to both gain and maintain a sense of power and control over events even in the face of almost overwhelming personal and political difficulties. Her work thus obliquely joins an ever-increasing amount of liberation and resistance literature created under circumstances where any other means of resistance or protest proves impossible.

The 'living life' and the 'living death', then, formed the central paradox of Bessie Head's existence, mediated by writing which was the tangible evidence of both her fight to survive and her survival itself. Although, like some evil spell cast upon her, its constraints continued to imprison and torment her throughout her life, much of which she would have preferred to live 'elsewhere, where my heart can find some peace and I can just live a quiet life' (30.4.1974 KMM BHP), like the old woman in her short story 'Witchcraft', she had 'too much to do to die bewitched' (4.12.1975 KMM BHP). She had a keen interest in many different things, as evidenced in her letters, for example, asking one correspondent 'What's the news about Mars in the papers? No life?'

(23.8.1976 KMM BHP) and writing to another that 'I have here a horoscope of Marie Antoinette which I copied for you from a book of astrology' (7.3.1981 KMM BHP). Her interests in the natural world were many, and she gained joy through her many friendships both in person and through her correspondence. Like Dikeledi Mokopi in *The Collector of Treasures*, her life might have been 'ashen in its loneliness and unhappiness. And yet she had always found gold amidst the ash, deep loves that had joined her heart to the hearts of others' (91 CT). Whether her death at the age of 49 from hepatitis with complications signified that she had not escaped the bewitchment cast upon her, even before her birth, it is certain that her writing enabled her to survive longer than she herself had anticipated. Her writing has had far-reaching effects both politically in that she has become the 'truly international being' she so much wanted to be, and personally in that, borrowing a definition of writing from Robert Louis Stevenson, she made it clear that:

Every book, is in an intimate sense, a circular letter to the friends of him who writes it. They alone take his meaning, they find private messages, assurances of love and expressions of gratitude dropped for them in every corner. It is the most beautiful and ultimate definition of a book and reading that I have ever read. I will quote it and quote it myself (9.10.1985 KMM BHP).

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